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THE LITERARY RENAISSANCE IN AMERICA

BY

C. E. BECHHOFER

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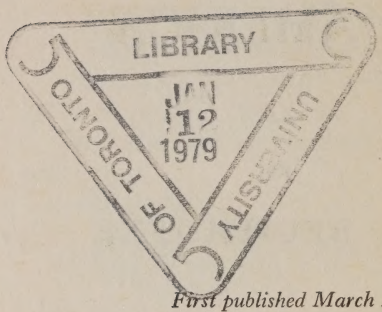

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TO

SINCLAIR LEWIS

MOST ROMANTIC OF REALISTS

FOREWORD

THE following impressions of contemporary American prose literature have been compiled during a series of recent ' voyages of literary discovery ' (as an American journalist described them) to the United States. Justification for setting them down is to be found, I think, in the very general misunderstanding and indifference—in many circles in America as in England generally—in regard to most American authors who do not conform absolutely with current and traditional English standards.

The fact is that America to-day has, almost suddenly, begun to achieve self-consciousness ; if this statement is thought too irreverent to the older generation, let me soften it by saying that America has begun to achieve a riper consciousness of herself as a separate nation with individual

means of expression. There are various ways of testing this national development; the most interesting and, I am inclined to think, the most significant method is through her art—and in America to-day her literature is her art. This is what I mean by the literary renaissance of America. So far as I know, no attempt has hitherto been made to discover its principal tendencies and to show how fundamentally these are connected with the development and interplay of the various cultural and racial forces inside the country.

There is another reason for studying modern American literature. Besides its intrinsic interest, it appears to be the growing end of English literature to-day. (I do not mean that it is English in other than the linguistic sense; indeed the reader will find specific warnings against this error, or half error, in my pages.) In England literature appears to be in a blind alley; admirers of Mr. James Joyce—and he is an Irishman domiciled in Paris—tell us that there is a

way out through the *cloaca*, but I for one cannot see it. But in America there is a new hope with a new impulse. If it is only partly English in tradition and origin, it is at least English in expression; and if we are prepared to receive it, it is ours for the welcoming.

I have sought in these pages to prepare a way of approach. The first two chapters deal inevitably with the work of some of the younger American critics, in particular, Mr. Van Wyck Brooks, Mr. Harold Stearns, Mr. H. L. Mencken, Mr. George Jean Nathan, and the late Randolph Bourne. The next chapter treats of two remarkable contemporary American novelists, Mr. James Branch Cabell and Mr. Joseph Hergesheimer. Mr. Eugene O'Neill, the dramatist, has the fourth chapter to himself. The fifth and sixth chapters are concerned with that extremely important part of American literature to-day which comes from the 'Middle West,' the former dealing in particular with the foreign, *i.e.* non-English, element in American letters,

exemplified by Mr. Theodore Dreiser and the best books of Miss Willa Cather, while the other examines the '100 per cent. American' work of such writers as Mr. Sinclair Lewis, Mr. Edgar Lee Masters, and Mr. Sherwood Anderson. In a final chapter, which is more an appendix than anything else, I have referred to several other young American writers whose work is of interest.

Of American poetry I have not spoken at all; it is a subject that needs special handling, and, moreover, I do not feel that it has yet been as intimately affected as American prose by the changing conditions of life and thought in the country.

Since I first set down some of my 'discoveries' in the hospitable pages of the London *Times Literary Supplement*—upon which, by permission of the Editor, I have based some of the criticisms that follow here—there has been a general tendency on both sides of the Atlantic to regard the new American writers as deserving more than merely superficial and condescending notice.

But if the American literary renaissance is recognized to-day *de facto*, it has not yet achieved the higher distinction of *de jure* recognition ; and it is to assist in this further critical process that these pages are published.

C. E. B.

4 Derby Street, London, W.

THE LITERARY RENAISSANCE IN AMERICA

I

THE essential thing about the recent American literature with which I propose to deal is that it represents a revolt against the intellectual standards that have for so long dominated American culture. One may accept the current phraseology and label the official philosophy ' Puritanism,' ' Philistinism,' or ' the optimism of the pioneer,' but the name does not much matter. The standards are there ; and whether one agrees or not, or not wholly, with the young Americans who to-day are revolting against them, it is absolutely necessary for any reader who does not wish to go astray in his judgment of new American books to accept the revolt as a serious fact.

Readers may gain a good idea of the significance of this battle of ideals from a recent book by Mr. Van Wyck Brooks, one of the

more brilliant younger American critics, entitled *The Ordeal of Mark Twain*. At the time of this book's first appearance I was assured in New York that a review had appeared in an English journal which treated it as merely an exercise in psycho-pathology and deprecated such attempts to intrude upon the privacy of the literary dead. Such a review may or may not have appeared, but the argument is one that does undoubtedly come into the Englishman's mind when he first lights upon Mr. Brooks's book. Yet any one acquainted at first hand with American conditions must at once realize that Mr. Brooks is attempting, through the example of Mark Twain, to set out the conflict between the America of the last century and of the present day, and, as it were, to analyse not only the mind of his hero, but that of the nation as a whole.

The strictly biographical portion of the book can be briefly summarized. Mark Twain was born and brought up in the atmosphere of little Mississippi towns, where, as one writer has said, one never saw a woman who was not anaemic and fretful, a

man who was not moody and taciturn, a child who was not stunted from hard labour or under-nourishment. Life in these towns was sordid and primitive, as whoever reads between the lines of *Huckleberry Finn* will easily see. Mark Twain was the fifth child of a loveless couple ; his father was a morose invalid, his mother a brave but narrow-minded woman, the Aunt Polly of *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*. He was delicate and nervous, and came in consequence to be more under his mother's influence than any of the other children. But his mother, says Mr. Brooks, was ' the embodiment of that old-fashioned, cast-iron Calvinism which had proved so favourable to the life of enterprising action, but which perceived the scent of the devil in any least expression of what is now known as the creative impulse.' He was a born artist, and therefore in a position of peculiar difficulty in that rough pioneer atmosphere, where what was socially desirable was uniformity and mediocrity, and any assertion of individual achievement was suspect.

Mark Twain definitely accepted the

standards of his mother and his friends ; he determined to be a success, to make money, to be a good companion and helper of society ; but the unconscious artist in him revolted against this. Mr. Brooks shows that this struggle between his conscious ideals and his suppressed emotions explains, as nothing else can, the amazing duality of the man. Only once in his life did Mark Twain find happiness—when he was a Mississippi pilot, the only profession in that part of America in his day which allowed a man to be a social success and yet his own master. Otherwise his life is one sad story of self-deception and self-contempt.

> A born artist ridiculing art, a born artist hating art, a born artist destroying art—there we have the natural evolution of a man who, in the end, wishes to destroy himself and the world.

Again :—

> To degrade beauty, to despise distinction and thus to simplify the life of the man with an eye single to the main chance—that, one may almost say, is the general tendency of Mark Twain's humour.

Whoever remembers his *Innocents Abroad*

or the *Yankee at the Court of King Arthur*, to mention no others of his books, will recognize the truth of this criticism. His unconscious urge all the time was to satirize the America around him, but this his training would not allow. Thus, as Mr. Brooks points out, in the *Yankee at the Court of King Arthur*, ' while the artist in him wished to satirize not England but America, the pioneer in him wished to satirize not America but England. And as usual the pioneer won.' It was much the same with Mark Twain as with the ignorant immigrants of to-day in America, who, revolting unconsciously against the Anglo-Saxon rule in the United States, transfer their distrust of it to England. Mark Twain's other biographers and critics have endeavoured to pass over his pessimism and self-contempt (' I am demeaning myself —I am allowing myself to be a mere buffoon. It 's ghastly. I can't endure it any longer ') as a pose, but this book makes it impossible for such an opinion to be held any longer.

The Ordeal of Mark Twain deserves much more attention from critics than it seems yet to have received. It illustrates the two main

traits of official American standards, as they are seen by those who rebel against them—first, the Calvinism of Mark Twain's mother ; and secondly, the pioneer spirit exemplified by the society of the towns, the mining camps, and the offices in which he spent his early years, and afterwards by his wife, who exercised an influence over him comparable only with that of his mother. Let us take them in turn. Mr. H. S. Canby in a recent book *Everyday Americans* has summed up the essence of ' the Calvinistic ethics of life which were the backbone of Puritan civilization,' in a summary of the doctrine of Jonathan Edwards :—

> Man, by the unarguable might of God, is born with a will whose nature may be either bad or good. Henceforth his reason is free, his choice is free, within the limits that his character permits. It becomes therefore supremely important that he shall choose and reason virtuously, for there is no way to be sure that he has a good will, that he is among the ' elect,' except by virtuous action leading to a sense of salvation. Thus in every condition of life, without excuse or palliation, the Christian must daily, hourly, strive to prove that he is one of the elect of God, saved

> from hell-fire by the character God has given him. Good intentions count for nothing. Good works, if unaccompanied by the sense of spiritual salvation, count for nothing. God, Himself blameless, has willed sin and sinful men. It is for us to prove that we are not among the damned.

This doctrine, Mr. Canby says, was powerfully believed in by perhaps a majority of one formative generation in America ; later the belief lessened, but a conviction of the infinite necessity of willing the right became a mental habit in American morality that persists and becomes a trait and a chief factor, as any reader can see, in so-called American idealism. And Mr. H. L. Mencken, the *enfant terrible* of contemporary American criticism, has told us that ' every third American devotes himself to improving and lifting up his fellow-citizens, usually by force ; the messianic delusion is our national disease.' It has been constant, though in superficially different forms, from the Middle West of Mark Twain's boyhood to the New York and Boston of to-day.

The ' optimism of the pioneer ' was a natural result of the terrible fight with nature

which made up the early life of the American people. The pioneer yearned for the assurance that all would at last be well ; he wanted relief, and laughter, and comfort, and hope. Let us quote from another book by Mr. Brooks, *Letters and Leadership*, the words of Mr. Horace Fletcher :—

> Optimism can be prescribed and applied as a medicine. Is there anything new and practical in this, or is it but a continuation of the endless discussion of the philosophy of life, morals, medicine, etc. ? Is it something that a busy person may put into practice, take with him to his business without interfering with his business, and profit by ; and, finally, what does it cost ? Does adoption of it involve discharging one's doctor friend, displeasing one's pastor, alienating one's social companions, or shocking the sacred traditions that were dear to father and mother ? It is ameliorative, preventive, and harmonizing ; and also it is easy, agreeable, ever available, and altogether profitable. By these hallmarks of Truth we know that it is true.

No more complete exposure of the conventional American standards of intellectual truth could be written. We see now how it was that Mark Twain, who started his

literary career as the unwilling writer of humorous sketches for a mining-camp paper, became finally the favourite author of the 'tired business man,' still so dear to the American editor and publisher. Twain's literary idol, William Dean Howells, characteristically declared that 'the more smiling aspects of life are the more American.' To quote Mr. Mencken again: 'The way to please the American reader is to proclaim in a confident manner, not what is true, but what is merely comforting. This is what is called building up. This is constructive criticism!' How much of successful contemporary American literature does this not explain? Hence 'Pollyanna,' hence Mr. Harold Bell Wright, hence so large a proportion of American short stories and best-selling fiction.

One of the most prominent mandarins of American letters of the last fifty years was Hamilton Wright Mabie, editor, lecturer, and essayist. A biography appeared not long ago with the title *The Life and Letters of Hamilton W. Mabie*, by Edwin W. Morse, which well reveals the atmosphere and nature of official

American thought. Mabie was most competent in everything he undertook; he was a successful writer and a brilliant speaker. When he wrote about literature, and told his many thousands of readers which books were 'good' and which were not, they listened with attention and selected their libraries accordingly. The only thing that his biography shows him to have lacked was ideas. In all the three hundred and thirty-seven pages that compose this volume the only arresting sentence is the pious (and somewhat inaccurate) affirmation that, thank God, American writers have usually been gentlemen! No study of the American culture of to-day would be complete without this book; it enables one to comprehend the flaming indignation of the younger generation with the Brahmins of yesterday and to-day. Mabie and his friends, of course, took the official standards very earnestly; though they were a small caste giving cultural laws to a people of many millions, of mixed races, beliefs, and traditions, they were (and their successors still are) ruthless in imposing these standards, with the result that Mr.

Brooks's reference to the ' neurotic anaemia ' of present-day America is not without justification. The same writer has discovered a paragraph in the autobiography of M. Georg Brandes, describing the state of the Scandinavian countries during the European wars of 1866-1870, which, Mr. Brooks claims, exactly describes the condition of America in recent times :—

> While their intellectual life languished, as a plant droops in a close, confined place, the people were self-satisfied. They rested on their laurels and fell into a doze. And while they dozed they had dreams. The cultivated, and especially the half-cultivated, public in Denmark and Norway dreamed that they were the salt of Europe. They dreamed that by their idealism they would regenerate the foreign nations. They dreamed that they were the free, mighty North, which would lead the cause of the peoples to victory—and they woke up unfree, impotent, ignorant.

Mr. Canby, to quote him again, declares roundly that the typical American, in contrast with the typical English ' radical-conservative,' is a ' conservative-liberal,' who

> keeps the pioneer's optimism, and is satisfied to take ready-made a system that his ancestors

> wrought by painful and open-minded experiment. In practice he is still full of initiative and invention; in principle he can conceive of only one dispensation, the ideas of political democracy [and, one may add, the corresponding moral and literary standards] which were the radicalism of 1861 and 1840 and 1789 and 1776.

'The American conservative-liberal,' he adds, 'acknowledges no opinion but his own'; he is narrow and repressive. Or let Mr. Mencken speak: 'Superficially, the United States seems to suffer from an endless and astonishing neophilism; actually all its thinking is done within the boundaries of a very small group of political, economic, and religious ideas, most of them unsound.'

American art and literature, according to Mr. Brooks, have established themselves on a superficial and barren technique, oblivious of the soul of man. And the same writer puts forward this suggestive criticism:—

> Our Society, which does everything by wholesale, is rapidly breeding a race of Hamlets the like of which has hardly been seen before, except perhaps in nineteenth-century Russia. Nothing is more remarkable

than the similarity in this respect between the two immense inchoate populations that flank Europe on east and west.

With these clues in mind, it will be possible to examine the work of some of the more remarkable younger American writers with more success than if the background of contemporary American letters were left unexplored.

II

Mr. Van Wyck Brooks's significant comparison between present-day America and pre-Revolutionary Russia helps one to a better understanding of the position occupied by certain of the younger American 'Radical' writers (using the adjective in the extreme American sense). There is indeed in America to-day a definite *intelligentsia* class similar in many ways to the Russian *intelligentsia* of the old days. It would, of course, be easy to overstress the resemblance, but within limits it does hold. In both cases we have an isolated class of essayists and critics who are in opposition to the ruling standards, but are yet quite out of touch with the 'plain people.' Just as in old Russia, this class is weakened by its isolation; it draws away and concentrates the young thought of the country, and at the same time sets itself in a position where it is much more

difficult to enunciate positive views on any subject than to hold a negative attitude. But such a position demands courage and sincerity from its members; what matters to them is not so much what they write, but how they write it and what they fight against. If we consider the work of two of the better known of the younger members of this *intelligentsia* we shall see that it is more their prowess as fighters than their ability or wisdom which has made them popular as leaders of the young revolt.

For example, were it not for the reverence with which he is regarded by his friends, one would hardly think to pay much attention to the work of the late Randolph Bourne; as things are, however, he is symbolical of so much in the young movement in American thought that it is necessary to consider him with attention. Randolph Bourne was a cripple who died in New York in 1918 at the age of thirty-two. He had a successful college career, and afterwards became associated with such papers as the *New Republic* during the first three years of its existence, the *Seven Arts*, now defunct, and the *Dial*

in its penultimate form. His range of interests and knowledge was extensive, and his friends are engaged to-day in the republication of his work under various heads. One volume contains his writing on political subjects, under the title of *Untimely Papers*, edited with an introduction by Mr. James Oppenheim, one of the editors of the *Seven Arts*; the other, edited by Mr. Brooks as *The History of a Literary Radical*, contains his literary essays. Reading these volumes through, one cannot help feeling that it would have been kinder of Bourne's friends to have celebrated his very remarkable human qualities in some other way than by collecting his writings and transferring their admiration to them. But, however, here the books are; and their significance is not least in their defects.

The seven essays reprinted as *Untimely Papers* were written during the War, and are concerned with it in greater or less degree. It is significant of the barrenness of the outlook of an *intelligentsia* that Bourne rarely shows in them any real comprehension of the issues of the European conflict. He is

always thinking locally—of the repercussion of the War upon American life, of the muddled and often exaggerated partisanship that preceded the entrance of America into it, and the hysteria that followed this. He writes in the same evangelical spirit that inspires his butts among the ruling class; with all his open contempt for excessive American pretensions, we find him naïvely regretting that 'we have not even retained the democratic leadership among the Allies.' He is as contemptuous of the intelligence of the Old World as any vote-catching politician in the backwoods. He declares, for example, that

> there are probably not a dozen men fighting in Europe who did not long ago give up every reason for their being there except that nobody knew how to get them away.

He proclaimed also that America was a rudderless nation that was being exploited by her cunning Allies, to whom her independence and her resources had been supinely surrendered. 'With the arrival of the British Mission our "independent basis" became a polite fiction.' His general atti-

tude towards the War is expressed in this sentence :—

> The American intellectuals, in their preoccupation with reality, seem to have forgotten that the real enemy is War rather than imperial Germany.

This contempt for ' reality,' so characteristic of the man, perhaps explains how, in August 1917, Bourne could enunciate the statement that ' Revolution, impossible while the Fatherland is in danger, becomes a practicable issue as soon as war is ended,' a fallacy which had already been exposed by the Russian Revolution in March 1917, and was to be still further discredited by events in Russia and Germany in the following twelvemonth. There is no need to delve further into his war writings ; he was wrong as often as he could be, although he wrote with a messianic pen. And yet Mr. Brooks can say of him that his was ' one of the fullest, richest, and most significant lives of the younger generation.' Full and rich it clearly was not ; but it was significant in the highest degree of a contempt for ' reality ' and an exaggeration of personal values

that are reminiscent of the old Russian *intelligentsia*.

Bourne's literary papers remain to be mentioned. The essays in *The History of a Literary Radical* contain nothing that necessitates a revision of the criticism of his political writings; rather they confirm it. Here is, for example, a paragraph of personal preferences, quoted from the essay in which he describes his experiences in Europe in 1913 and 1914 as the holder of a travelling fellowship of Columbia University. He writes of London :—

> Lectures by Shaw and Chesterton on succeeding nights—Shaw, clean, straight, clear, and fine as an upland wind and summer sun; Chesterton, gluttonous and thick, with something tricky and unsavoury about him—gave me a personal estimate of their contrasted philosophies. Then there was Professor Hobhouse, excessively judicial, with that high consciousness of excellence which the Liberal professor seems to exude; Graham Wallas, with his personal vivacity of expression and lack of any clear philosophy, who considered the American sociologist a national disaster; H. G. Wells, a suggestive talker, but very disappointing personally; John A. Hobson,

> whom I cannot admire too much, a publicist with immense stores of knowledge, poise of mind, and yet radical philosophy and gifts of journalistic expression, a type that we simply do not seem to be able to produce in this country.

With which let us leave Bourne for the moment.

Very different in many ways from Randolph Bourne, and yet in others only too similar, is Mr. Harold Stearns, who for a year or two after the War seemed to take his place as a leading spirit among the younger radical publicists in America. He is infinitely more practical than Bourne, less of a doctrinaire and a prophet, and less often deceived by phrases and false premises. But he also is in danger of floundering in a sphere of dislikes and oppositions ; he also, to use the current American vocabulary, is too much the creature of ' reactions.' His book upon *Liberalism in America* is not altogether a fair test of his abilities ; he has written much better work since in reviews.

His theme in this book is chiefly the origins of American Liberalism, its breakdown at

the outbreak of the War, and its collapse as exemplified by President Wilson. In his introduction the author admits that the book is largely negative ; he uses so much space to attack conscription and the hypocrisy of Governments, especially the idealistic American Government, that he has little left in which to set out the real problems that he raises. But these are much more interesting. He shows that the Anglo-Saxon ruling class in the United States is faced with a vast alien population with different emotions and traditions from its own ; that American statesmanship is fast proceeding on the road to Imperialism ; that the country is still faced with the terrible problem of the negro race in the South ; and so on. It is the raising of these points that gives the book its value. But it is too unevenly written and diffuse to be a great contribution to the new American literature of revolt. But, if it is unlikely to add to Mr. Stearn's fast-growing reputation, it must be of value, if only to himself, as a guide to his weaknesses, which are typical of those of the young American *intelligentsia*.

One turns now to a very different figure.

There is a third critic in America of the new school who is as positive in his judgments and attitudes as most of the others are the opposite. This is Mr. H. L. Mencken. The most important of his recent works—his excellent and encyclopaedic study of *The American Language* does not concern us here —are the three collections of critical essays entitled *A Book of Prefaces*, *Prejudices : First Series*, and *Prejudices : Second Series*.[1] Mr. Mencken is an American of mixed German, Irish, and English descent ; he lives and works principally in Baltimore. He is a critic of extremes ; his loudest admiration is reserved for Mr. Conrad and Mr. Dreiser ; his loudest thunders of disapproval for the reigning pundits of American letters and for the preposterous ' anti-vice ' societies, which take so large a part in the development of literary taste in America. As an iconoclast he has no equal among the young critics, for he brings the devastating and (for America) rare weapon of humour to his aid. He is indeed the foremost fighter against the abominable thing known as ' Comstockery.'

[1] *Prejudices : Third Series* has just appeared.

A long essay in his *Book of Prefaces* deals with ' Puritanism as a Literary Force ' ; in it he analyses the origin and development of the ' anti-vice ' movement, which, from beginning its career with some harmless sanitary work on railway-station bookstalls, soon found itself with the power and will to persecute such books as *Jude the Obscure*, the Bible (when run in serial form by an adventurous editor), *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, Dreiser's *The Genius*, and Cabell's *Jurgen*. (*Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer*, by the way, were banned as immoral by the public libraries of Denver and Omaha in 1903, and of Brooklyn in 1906.) These societies are enabled to bring about the virtual suppression of any book in which they can discern any vestige of danger for the young maiden, or even which ' tends to deprave the minds ' of any ' young and inexperienced ' person who is ' open to such influences '—to quote a formula established in the American courts. This essay must be read by every one who wishes to understand the present-day influence of the Puritan tradition in America.

There is no space here to discuss Mr.

Mencken's work as a whole, though it may be interesting to mention some of his judgments upon European authors. In an essay on 'The late Mr. Wells,' he laments the passing of the novelist and the appearance of the evangelist in the career of this author. Mr. Shaw, about whom he claims to have written the first published book, has, he says, made it his 'life-work to announce the obvious in the terms of the scandalous.' Sudermann he describes as follows :—

> He starts off furiously, let us say, as a Zola, and then dilutes Zolaism with romance, and then pulls himself up and begins to imitate Ibsen, and then trips himself up and falls headlong into the sugar-bowl of sentimentality.

He has no admiration for Mr. Chesterton, to whom, indeed, he once refers as 'the suave and oedematous Chesterton, in a late effort to earn the honorarium of a Chicago newspaper.' This disparagement of Mr. Chesterton, which we see to be shared by Randolph Bourne also, is a not inexplicable phenomenon among young American critics. They cannot understand that Mr. Chesterton may be what they call a 'reactionary' in

some things, and yet advocate as earnestly as they do many of the ideals that are dearest to them. They think that this is a sign of 'trickery.' Actually, their attitude suggests an immaturity of their vision, which is one of the typical defects of an isolated *intelligentsia*. I have sometimes felt, indeed, that Mr. Mencken's thunder is designed to mask a rather puzzled and undeveloped judgment; but I wonder at the same time whether he has not deliberately endeavoured to outshout the loudest of the more superficial American critics in order to be accepted by their readers as at least as qualified to express an opinion as they are. In Rome one must do what the Romans do; and in America one must fight the Philistines with their own weapon—even if this is sometimes the jawbone of an ass. For, with all his obvious defects, Mr. Mencken is the clearest and often the wisest voice in current American criticism, and it is safe to say that the present literary renaissance there would have been impossible without his insistent and ungrateful spadework.

Having mentioned Mr. Mencken, we may

devote some attention to the second partner in the critical collaboration known to young America as ' Mencken, Nathan & God.' Mr. George Jean Nathan is, with Mr. Mencken, joint editor and owner of a New York magazine, the *Smart Set*, which has been instrumental in introducing to the American public many of the better of the young American writers. These two writers have also written several books together of such diverse interest as, for example, *The American Credo*, a caustic exposure of the governing ideas in the average American's mind, and *Europe after 8.15*, a connoisseur's guide to the evening amusements of the chief European capitals. (The latter book is practically unobtainable in London or Paris, despite every bookseller's conviction that works of the nature of *Europe since 1815* cover the same ground.) Mr. Nathan's particular department is dramatic criticism, and he has been acclaimed by Mr. Gordon Craig as ' the best of all theatre critics, to my mind.' This is high praise, and one turns to two volumes, *Comedians All* and *The Theatre, the Drama, the Girls*, which

contain selections from his latest dramatic criticisms, to see to what extent it is justified. They disclose Mr. Nathan as a critic of very considerable experience, vivacity, and acuteness. His style is deliberately, not to say artificially American—that is to say, he insists on using such unusual expressions as 'jay' (=rustic), 'boob' (=an unsophisticated person), and such turns of phrase as 'the juiciness of your wheeze,' 'the local schlegels,' 'hick hazlittry,' and so on. But when the reader surmounts this preliminary obstacle he will find Mr. Nathan both instructive and amusing. He is familiar with the modern theatre of a dozen nations, and is able, for instance, to expose effectively the attempts of American producers in war time to pass off adaptations of German and Austrian plays as Scandinavian works—efforts, by the way, which, to Mr. Nathan's malicious delight, completely deceived his critical colleagues of the New York press, and led them to devote many paragraphs, some of which he reprints, to showing how definitely these plays followed in the tradition of Ibsen.

These two volumes are made up of short

paragraphs, varying from a few lines to a few pages in length, on all kinds of subjects related to the stage. Here, for instance, is Mr. Nathan's verdict upon the 'theatre of ideas':—

> The American 'drama of ideas,' of which one hears so much, may be said to be grounded on the following irrevocable ideology: the idea that every American travelling in a foreign land, however beguiling and beautiful, cherishes an overpowering desire to return immediately to his small home town in Indiana; the idea that all persons placed on trial before the law, particularly those accused of murder, are guiltless; the idea that the sudden recollection of one's mother is enough to restrain one from tampering with a beautiful married woman; the idea that the accumulation of great wealth inevitably brings with it great unhappiness; the idea that all poor girls are virtuous; the idea that whenever a villain succeeds in getting hold of a hero's revolver and subsequently, after taunting the hero, essays to shoot him, the villain is always frustrated through the fact that the hero has exercised the precaution either to remove the cartridges or to load the gun with blanks; the idea that a thirty-year-old actor in a white night-shirt kneeling beside a bed saying, 'Now

I lay me down to sleep,' in a deep bass voice, is the estranged couple's six-year-old son Adolph; the idea that when a trivial fire breaks out in a remote corner of the city the skies for miles around are promptly suffused with a deep crimson glow; and the idea that the play is worth three dollars a seat.

Of American prudery in the theatre he observes that 'ten years ago the American audience may have held, with commendable steadfastness of faith, that adultery was confined to milk, but in the meantime its suspicions may be said to have become somewhat aroused.' The technique of a rather tedious American dramatist is dismissed as 'the condensation of the protagonist's lifetime into two hours and the expansion of the theatre-goer's two hours into a lifetime.' He pounds vigorously at the fame of Mr. Drinkwater's *Abraham Lincoln*: 'There was not a trace of imagination in the manuscript from start to finish,' is one sentence in his criticism; 'it was as literal as a newspaper's account of a street fight. There was not a trace of poetry in it, nor a trace of soundly sympathetic insight into character. All that

was sharply projected was projected not by the dramatist, but by the force of the memorable man and the memorable events of which the dramatist treated.'

It is not altogether fair to Mr. Nathan to take these isolated quotations as representative of his achievement as a dramatic critic, though it is difficult to see what other method could be used in treating of books so fragmentary as these. Every here and there, however, one comes upon revelations of his attitude to the theatre. It is clear that he prefers a ' low-brow ' play adequately written and produced to any number of ' high-brow ' failures. Mr. Nathan's interest in ' the girls ' is evidenced by the title of one of the two books mentioned ; and, even if we are not very much impressed by his smart aphorisms on the subject of women, it cannot be objected against him that he does not state quite fairly and adequately the place he assigns to his heroines in the theatre.

All forms of drama are grist to his mill ; he is equally at home in discussing *King Lear*, Sacha Guitry's productions, and *Baby Mine*. The defect in his judgments, or, shall I

rather say, the opinion about which his readers are most likely to quarrel with him, is his statement that the theatre is a place where one goes to be amused. There is no need to argue this opinion here; having stated it, we are content to urge Mr. Nathan's critics to turn to his lively pages for themselves, and to decide according to their lights whether a system of dramatic criticism established on this basis is entirely satisfactory to them or not. In any case they will find a number of volumes of amusing and capable writing, much of which is equal to that of any other living dramatic critic. The importance of Mr. Nathan's criticism as an antidote to Puritan ideals is almost as great as that of his colleague, Mr. Mencken.

The case that I have endeavoured to present for and against the critical side of the American literary renaissance could be illustrated by a reference to a recent book of essays entitled *Civilization in the United States*. Written by thirty young Americans under the editorship of Mr. Harold Stearns, it might be accepted as a manifesto of their revolt against the ruling intellectual standards

of their country. The editor in his introduction gives a *résumé* of the general conclusions reached by his circle. They are, first, ' that in almost every branch of American life there is a sharp dichotomy between teaching and practice ; we let not our right hand know what our left hand doeth ' ; secondly, ' that whatever else American civilization is, it is not Anglo-Saxon ' ; and, thirdly, ' that the most moving and pathetic fact in the social life of America to-day is emotional and aesthetic starvation,' of which, he adds, ' the mania for petty regulation, the driving, regimentation, and drilling, the secret society and its grotesque regalia, the firm grasp on the unessentials of material organization of our pleasures and gaieties are all eloquent stigmata.' After this it is hardly necessary to remind the reader that ' we do not write to please ' ; rather, one is inclined to feel, the opposite is the case, although we are assured that ' whatever our defects, we Americans, we have one virtue and perhaps a saving virtue—we still know how to laugh at ourselves.'

There is not very much evidence for this

last claim in some of the essays ; indeed, one might take this almost as a touchstone to them. The painstaking gloom of many of the writers too often carries with it an atmosphere of naïveté and insularity, to which, as we shall see, one of the three foreigners who contribute their views under a general title of ' American Civilization from the Foreign Point of View ' deftly refers. The contributors who write with humour are by far the most compelling. Mr. H. L. Mencken, for example, writing with more restraint than is sometimes the case with him, contributes an impression of American politics, a subject upon which he is admirably qualified to write as a political journalist of many years' experience. Discussing the notoriously low intellectual standard of some members of Congress, he attributes it largely to the clauses in the Constitution of the United States that insist that a Representative and a Senator shall be inhabitants of the States they are candidates in. This rule has come in practice to be still more strictly applied, until at last elections are largely a matter of local influence. This parochialism

in politics lays the candidates open to the sort of public blackmail which the Anti-Saloon League used so effectively in its support of Prohibition.

Mr. Harold Stearns, the editor, contributes an essay upon 'The Intellectual Life.' He takes as his text Professor Einstein's remark that 'women dominate the entire life of America,' and elaborates it in historical perspective. While the pioneer was busy subduing a continent and the less adventurous American was trying to make a fortune in the cities, 'what more natural under the circumstances than that the unimportant things of life—art, music, religion, literature, the intellectual life—should be handed over to them [women] to keep them busy and contented, while he confined himself to the real man's job of making money and getting on in the world?'

> If the French romanticists of the eighteenth century invented the phrase *la femme mécomprise*, a modern Gallic visitor would be tempted to observe that in this twentieth century the United States was the land of *l'homme mécompris*.

Mr. Van Wyck Brooks's essay upon ' The Literary Life ' is in some ways the most important contribution to the book, since to young America literature and civilization are almost synonymous. He complains that there is little room for the developing writer in America. If the young author does not quickly succeed, he must soon be disheartened, on account of a vicious circle of causes and effects. There are few opportunities for the young American writer to ' play himself in,' as we say.

> How many English writers owe their ultimate salvation to such trivial agencies as *T. P.'s Weekly*? In America, where nothing of the kind has existed until lately, or nothing adequate to the number of those who might have benefited by it, the literary aspirant is lost unless his powers mature at once.

Moreover, there is little encouragement for young American writers to be expected from the ruling caste in criticism ; this is strangely archaic in its standards, and for years now it has often been left to English critics and publishers to be the first to recognize American talent, unless this be of the tradi-

tional Bostonian type. The third link in the vicious circle is the shame of not being successful. ' Did it ever occur to Mark Twain,' Mr. Brooks asks, ' that he *could* be honourably poor ? ' The only consolation that Mr. Brooks can see is that an age of reaction (whether political or literary or both) stirs ' the few ' into a consciousness of themselves. This is the creed of *intelligentsias* all the world over, but it is a poor substitute for the healthy intellectual life that its members would wish to enjoy. Mr. Stearns makes a similar observation when he remarks that ' the most hopeful thing of intellectual promise in America to-day is the contempt of the younger people for their elders.' But he admits that ' it is not a disciplined contempt ; it is not yet kindled by any real love of intellectual values '—a sincere confession which makes the attitude of many of the writers in this book more comprehensible than it might otherwise be.

One may notice a curious and recurrent divergence of opinion on an important point in these essays, which seems to have eluded the criticism of the writers when they met

to discuss and collate the contributions. Is America a 'young' or an 'old' country? Mr. George Jean Nathan, for example, whose essay upon the American theatre is an able summing up of the subject—while condemning the poor taste of the provincial American theatrical public, especially in Boston, the reputed centre of American culture, he justly acknowledges the wide range of interest of both public and managers in New York—remarks that 'the American drama, like the American audience, lacks repose. This is ever logically true of a new civilization.' And most of the other essayists seem inclined to regard American civilization as a young growth, crippled by Anglo-Saxon swaddling-clothes; we see it through their eyes like a Chinese girl's foot, unmercifully deformed by traditional bandages. But Mr. Brooks, on the other hand, is gloomily inclined to take the view that Mr. Chesterton was right when he suggested that 'the matter which America has very seriously to consider is not how near it is to its birth and beginning, but how near it may be to its end.' Whatever the American men of genius

are, Mr. Chesterton continued, they are not young gods making a new world. 'Is the art of Whistler a brave, barbaric art, happy and headlong? Does Mr. Henry James infect us with the spirit of a schoolboy? . . . Out of America has come a sweet and startling cry, as unmistakable as the cry of a dying man.' It is clear that neither Mr. Chesterton nor Mr. Nathan is wholly right: in some respects America is old and weary; in others it is raw and young.

This antithesis, however, like the idea of that between reaction and the *intelligentsia*, is a fruitless path for young America to pursue; it leads to nowhere out of nothing. The conscious self-isolation of the *intelligentsia* makes for no better results than the unconscious isolation of the mandarins. *Civilization in the United States*, which, I repeat, might have been anticipated to contain a manifesto of the aims of the young intellectuals of America, proves to be almost wholly a recital of their grievances. It is one of the three foreign contributors—Mr. E. A. Boyd, in his essay 'As an Irishman sees it'—who seems best to have noticed this.

He is not in the least blind to America's defects ; he boldly declares that

> the United States is a generation or two behind Europe. The rude and vigorous young democracy, cited by its admirers in extenuation of aesthetic sins of omission and commission, suddenly stands forth attired in the garment of ideas which clothed early Victorian England.

The native civilization of America, he says, may be embryonic ; but, in respect to literature as to the Constitution, its inhabitants have made ancestor worship a cardinal virtue. He sees little hope in the present attitude of opposition affected by the young men. ' Back of all their plaints is the superstition that Europe is free from the blight which makes America intolerable in their eyes.' Puritanism and selfish individualism may have made farther invasions into life in America than in the Old World, but to suppose, as the young American intellectual is certainly inclined, that to register his protest against the Prohibition laws and the scandalous censorship of books and ideas in the United States is a sufficient justification of

his existence is a certain road to barrenness and disillusionment. Young America certainly cannot by taking thought add a cubit to its stature, especially as most of its thought nowadays is devoted to lopping off the heads of its elders.

To quote Mr. Boyd again :—

> A thousand and one reasons have been advanced to explain the absence of a genuine American literature, and all of them are probably true. The country is comparatively young, and its energies have been, are still, directed chiefly towards the exploitation of material resources and the conquest of natural difficulties. Racially the nation is in an embryonic state, and until some homogeneity is attained the creation of a native tradition must be slow. Moreover, the conflict of diverse races implies, in a broad sense, the clash of two or more civilizations, one of which must impose its culture if any organized progress is to be made. The language of the Hyphenated States is English, but to what extent will the nation in being evolve in accordance with this linguistic impulse ? Will it be Anglo-Saxon, Teutonic, Latin, or Slav ? These are a few of the problems which have a direct bearing upon the intellectual development of the country. They must be solved

> before America can give her imprint to the arts. They cannot be solved by the assumption that the Anglo-Saxon hyphen is alone authentic. The permanent hypothesis of Colonialism must be abandoned if 'Americanization' is ever to be more than the silliest political cant.

Certainly the Irish onlooker seems to be seeing more of the game than the native Americans who have contributed the bulk of this volume; for this is among the few paragraphs in the book that faces the fundamental issues before America in a dispassionate spirit. The answer to Mr. Boyd's question must come not from further disgruntled criticism among the *intelligentsia*, but from a rekindling of the creative spirit among American authors, to whom we may now turn.

III

THE younger generation of American writers has offended the older arbiters of literary standards in that country, not only by taking seriously things that the latter have condemned, but still more by treating lightly subjects that to them have been sacred, or at least taboo. Retribution has been sure, if not always swift; one of the most sensational recent efforts of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice was the sequestration of Mr. James Branch Cabell's mediaeval romance *Jurgen*, then in its third edition, in which the author had committed the heinous crime of treating sex as a joke and chronicling the adventures and gallantries of his quite non-moral hero. The sale of the book became a legal offence in America, pending the remote decision of the Courts whether it was 'obscene.' (It may be recalled that a translation of *Mademoiselle de Maupin* took three years to pass through the American Courts, though it eventually left them with-

out a stain on its reputation, thanks to the good sense of the publisher's counsel in reading the book from cover to cover to the jury.[1]) Meanwhile all the publisher's stock was attached by the Society, but second-hand copies, clandestinely sold, are known to have fetched high sums ; the author received an extensive advertisement, which, however, he presumably did not appreciate. The book has recently passed the Courts, and is now republished.

Mr. Cabell is from the South, a member of an old Virginian family. He is thus an exception to the ' vast vacuity ' that Mr. Mencken, in his essay on ' The Sahara of Bozart ' (=Beaux Arts) in his second book of *Prejudices*, declares to be the

[1] While touching on this subject, I must confess that I have nothing but contempt for the American publishers who subtly but unmistakably suggest that a book, known to contain risky passages, is pornographic by putting it out at three or four times the usual published price, and then complain bitterly of the persecution of the ' Vice Society ' when it suppresses it. If they are willing to profit by the supposed pornographic qualities of the book, they should not whine when they are called upon to pay the price. If, as is mostly the case, the book is not pornographic at all, the blame in such instances seems to me to rest as much on the publisher as on the Society. This criticism, of course, does not apply to *Jurgen*, which was published in the normal manner.

literary characteristic of the Southern States of the Union, an opinion which he corroborates with this touching couplet from the works of a Southern poet, one J. Gordon Coogler :—

Alas, for the South! Her books have grown fewer—
She never was much given to literature.

Mr. Cabell's first books consisted of two or three genealogical studies of his ancestors. Besides these he has written half a dozen novels of mediaeval romance and contemporary Virginian life, of which the more important are, of the former class, *Jurgen*, *Figures of Earth*, and *Domnei*, and of the second, *The Rivet in Grandfather's Neck* and *The Cords of Vanity*; an essay on literary values, *Beyond Life*; two volumes that are in effect collections of historical short stories and vignettes, *The Certain Hour* and *The Cream of the Jest*; and a set of verse translations and adaptations chiefly of mediaeval poetry, *From the Hidden Way*. Until the suppression of *Jurgen*, Mr. Cabell had endured long years of neglect and contempt—a typical review of one of his books described

it as ' worse than immoral—dull.' [1] But the development of his work may best be read about in a sympathetic article which Mr. Hugh Walpole wrote in the *Yale Review* in 1920, and which has been reprinted as a pamphlet by Mr. Cabell's publisher. Mr. Walpole concludes with the statement that ' no writer, new to us in the last ten years, has revealed in English so arresting a personality ' as Mr. Cabell.

A summary of *Jurgen* will perhaps convey a notion of what the book is, and how it has so offended the vested interests which safeguard the morals of the American reading public. Jurgen is a pawnbroker in the mediaeval realm of Poitesme, and he has a

[1] Mr. Cabell has had the pleasing notion of printing a long selection of the reviews of his books in an appendix to *Beyond Life*. One learns, for example, that Mr. Ben Hecht (of the *Chicago News*), himself a novelist of whose chief novels it will be necessary to treat later, has referred to Mr. Cabell's ' maudlin and lachrymose romantics. . . . The burbles of profound and academic inanities. . . . Cabell remains the sardonic professor mouthing in the boring rhetoric of the classroom.' Mr. Sumner, of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, declared that *Jurgen* is ' so obscene, lewd, lascivious, and indecent that a minute description of the same would be offensive.' Another excerpt is from the *New York Sun* which, with unconscious irony, supposes that ' with time and experience, aided by the sympathetic appreciation of the reviewer, Mr. Cabell will doubtless learn.'

scold of a wife, whose name is Dame Lisa. He meets the Devil, who, to do Jurgen a kindness, removes Dame Lisa to a desolate place, where, however, her husband seeks her 'because all his wife's family assured him that this was the manly thing to do.' He sets off on Walpurgis Night, 'when almost anything is rather more than likely to happen,' and falls in with Nessus, the centaur, who clothes him in his magic robe and carries him into the country of mystery.

There Jurgen meets one of his boyhood's loves; she is as she was twenty years before, but Jurgen is elderly and fat. So he gets into touch with one of the Fates, who restores his youth, though he still carries about with him his paunchy middle-aged shadow. He kills the man who (he remembers) afterwards marries his beloved, and, just as he is about to make love to her beside the corpse, she grows old again and Jurgen leaves her in a fine state of moral indignation. He becomes a duke in the enchanted country and effects an 'orthodox rescue' of the Princess Guinevere, whose father shows a reprehensible lack of paternal morality in

regard to her relations with Jurgen. They live happily together until a mission comes from Britain to take away the Princess to be King Arthur's bride. One evening Jurgen is sleeping in his room, when he is visited by the ghosts of his wicked grandfather and Queen Sylvia, one of the latter's twelve wives. The grandfather's ghost explains that, owing to an unfortunate coincidence of anniversaries, he has to haunt two different places at midnight that night; and he asks Jurgen to oblige him by undertaking one of the ghostly murders. Jurgen agrees, and takes a magic potion that transforms him into a ghost; as he often says, he is 'willing to taste any drink once.'

> Jurgen floated round his bed once or twice, then to the ceiling for practice. Through inexperience, he miscalculated the necessary force, and popped through into the room above,

where he saw what need not be described here. His grandfather's ghost explains his task to him.

> 'The assassination will take place in the White Turret as usual. Queen Sylvia will

> instruct you in the details. You can invent most of the affair, however, as the Lady of the Lake, who occupies the room to-night, is very probably unacquainted with our terrible history.'

After very realistically murdering the Queen's ghost, Jurgen leaves the White Turret with her and begins a flirtation on the stairs, until a cock crows and the Queen disappears, much impressed by his gallantry.

A few days later Guinevere departs for King Arthur's country, but the Lady of the Lake, otherwise called Anaitis, consoles Jurgen. They pass together to her land of Cocaigne, and 'complied with the customs of that country.' Jurgen learns that its inhabitants are myths, and though he is annoyed that Anaitis—'a popular myth in every land'—persists in trying to mother him, and still more annoyed when a plausible philologist tries to persuade Jurgen himself that he is a solar myth, still he passes the time pleasantly with her, though he has to admit that she is not easily amused, for 'Asian myths are remarkably destitute of humour.' He meets her daughters, the Eumenides :—

> Rather pathetically earnest and unimaginative little lasses Jurgen found the young Eumenides; they inherited much of their mother's narrow-mindedness, if not their father's brooding and gloomy tendencies; but in them narrow-mindedness showed merely as amusing. And Jurgen loved them, and would often reflect what a pity it was that these dear little girls were destined, when they reached maturity, to spend the rest of their lives in haunting criminals and adulterers and parricides and, generally, such persons as must inevitably tarnish the girls' outlook upon life, and lead them to see too much of the worst side of human nature.

Soon after, Jurgen, who is seeking justice and feels that he is not getting it in Cocaigne, departs thence for the island of Leuke, where Queen Helen of Troy dwells. He has to travel with the Equinox and complains of having to accompany 'a fictitious thing, a mere convention.' However, he reaches Leuke and meets a charming hamadryad, who is femininely contemptuous of Helen's famed beauty. He finds Silenus and his satyrs at play, and is rather shocked at the freedom of their behaviour. In the city of Pseudopolis, where dwell the heroes and

heroines of Hellas, he comes to the room of Queen Helen. But she, he sees, is none other than Dorothy, his first beloved ; and fearing to spoil his boyhood's dream of her, he departs without even speaking to her. (In one of his other books Mr. Cabell writes that ' it is only by preserving faith in human dreams that we may, after all, perhaps some day make them come true ' ; this *motif*, in various forms, enters into all his stories.)

He lives happily with the hamadryad. One day she has to tidy her tree-dwelling for the winter, so she gives Jurgen a packet of lunch and sends him down to the seashore, where he passes the day in drowsy contemplation. He watches the waves coming in :—

> Far out a shadow would form on the water, like the shadow of a broadish plank, scudding shoreward, and lengthening and darkening as it approached. Presently it would be some hundred feet in length, and would assume a hard, smooth darkness, like that of green stone ; this was the under side of the wave. Then the top of it would curdle, the southern end of the wave would collapse, and, with exceeding swiftness, this white feathery falling would plunge and scamper and bluster

> northward, the full length of the wave. It would be neater and more workmanlike to have each wave tumble down as a whole. From the smacking and the splashing, what looked like boiled milk would thrust out over the brown sleek sands ; and as the mess spread it would thin to a reticulated whiteness, like lace, and then to the appearance of smoke sprays clinging to the sands.

This is a very pretty piece of writing, and one feels that Jurgen would appreciate it and agree that, like himself, Mr. Cabell is ' a monstrous clever fellow.'

Pseudopolis is captured by the neighbouring Philistines, and its inhabitants fly away through the air ; the invaders also put to rout the People of the Fields, among whom Jurgen is living with his hamadryad ; judging Silenus and the rest to be ' obsolete illusions,' the Philistines condemn them to extinction and cut down the hamadryad's tree. The Queen of the Philistines shows Jurgen in private a contempt for conventions that she would in public never tolerate ; she urges him to save himself by professing hypocritically to accept the Philistines' laws, but he refuses and is promptly consigned

to the Hell of his fathers. Devils search him for smuggled water as he enters the abode of the damned; they are delighted to discover that, as his conscience does not hurt him, he will not need to be tortured. They tell him that all the damned are suffering torments at their own desire.

> 'You have no idea what elaborate tortures they insist their exceeding wickedness has merited, as though that which they did or left undone could possibly matter to anybody. And to contrive these tortures quite tires us out.'

Jurgen's father, Coth, has made himself an intolerable nuisance in Hell in this way. He insists on suffering the torments of Hell fire. Jurgen suggests to him that he is making an unnecessary fuss.

> 'Oh, take away this son of mine,' cried Coth; 'for he is his mother all over again; and though I was the vilest sinner that ever lived, I have not deserved to be plagued twice with such silly questions. And I demand that you loitering devils bring more fuel.'
>
> 'Sir,' said a panting little fiend, in the form of a tadpole with hairy arms and legs like a monkey's, as he ran up with four bundles of

faggots, ' we are doing the very best we can for your discomfort. But you damned have no consideration for us, and do not remember that we are on our feet day and night, waiting upon you,' said the little devil, whimpering, as with his pitchfork he raked up the fire about Coth. ' You do not even remember the upset condition of the country, on account of the war with Heaven, which makes it so hard for us to get you all the inconveniences of life. Instead, you lounge in your flames, and complain about the service, and Grandfather Satan punishes us, and it is not fair.'

Jurgen settles down comfortably in Hell with a vampire, but, later on, after a trifling affair with Satan's wife, he goes off to Heaven, which is ruled by ' the God of his grandmother.' He talks with the latter, who explains to him that, when his grandmother died, she was amazed and hurt to discover that Heaven did not exist; so, out of pity for her, a Heaven was created exactly according to the ideas she had formed of it during her earthly life. Jurgen, who has risen from a mere rejuvenated pawnbroker to be in turn a duke, a prince, a king, an

emperor, and a pope, finally becomes God; but he is still unhappy because he is seeking justice. So he decides to find his wife and return to earth, feats which he accomplishes in the last chapters of the book.

It has been possible to give only a rough outline of this most delightful Cabellaisian romance; every chapter (except, perhaps, in some degree the few that follow his adventures in Heaven) is extremely amusing and full of subtle turns of thought and phrase. It must, however, be admitted that any one who is in search of the salacious should not waste time on *Jurgen*, not even with the aid of the list of offensive pages so obligingly compiled by the Society for the Suppression of Vice. One would as soon go to a troubadour for smoking-room stories.

Mr. Cabell's latest book, *Figures of Earth*, is somewhat in the same style. Manuel the swineherd is akin to Jurgen the pawnbroker, and while his adventures are less sensational they are quite as readable.[1] The

[1] A savage attack upon Mr. Cabell by Mr. Maurice Hewlett appeared in a prominent New York paper (*The Literary Review* of the *New York Evening Post*, April 23, 1921) in the guise of a review of *Figures of Earth*. It began with

book contains a clear enunciation of Mr. Cabell's philosophy—the desire of his heroes, both mediaeval and contemporary, for the dreams of their youth, the vanity of desires achieved, and the folly of man's conceit—

> an ape reft of his tail, and grown rusty at climbing, who yet feels himself to be a symbol and the frail representative of Omnipotence in a place that is not home.

In Mr. Cabell's Virginian stories there

generalities of this kind: 'Mr. Cabell's nonsense does not suit mine. To say the worst of it at once, I find it pretentious. It parades a science which it does not possess. It is washed over, so to speak, with a varnish of learning which is too thin to bear inspection by anybody who knows anything. It is a patchwork lifted from anywhere, fitted in anyhow. . . . Borrowed and faded fineries and garnishes can be detected.' Then Mr. Hewlett set out to prove that 'Mr. Cabell's acquaintance with mediaeval lore seems to be mainly with names,' since, for example, the latter places Albania adjacent to the Bay of Biscay, and uses a word 'geas' frequently, although (said Mr. Hewlett) 'I know something myself about the thirteenth century, but not that word.'

Unfortunately for Mr. Hewlett, Mr. Cabell replied in the following vein: 'With real astonishment one gathers that Mr. Hewlett is not sufficiently acquainted with the familiar story of Melusine to know that the Albania over which King Helmas reigned was in Scotland,' and 'that his knowledge of Gaelic legend does not extend to the very common word "geas,"' answering in turn all Mr. Hewlett's criticisms with a wit and scholarship far superior to the latter's.

One does not need to exaggerate the merit of Mr. Cabell's work to demonstrate the critical futility of such attacks as Mr. Hewlett's.

is the same urbane, ironic delicacy that is in the others. But there is no need to describe them here—*The Rivet in Grandfather's Neck* is the best—since they are easily obtainable, the Comstock Societies being unable to find in them references to such terrible things as nightdresses. But one feels that the old Puritan order in America must be suffering more from the delightful works of Mr. Cabell than from almost any other of the writers who have dared to enter the lists against its traditions.

From him one turns naturally to Mr. Joseph Hergesheimer, another romantic writer who has not tried to force himself to write in accordance with the reigning literary traditions of his country. True, his challenge has not been so startling as Mr. Cabell's and he has had correspondingly less to suffer; a long early period of obscurity is now being repaid by a growing popularity.

Mr. Hergesheimer has the gifts of romance, atmosphere, and colour; his writing is certainly greatly influenced by English models, chiefly, it would appear, by Mr. Joseph Conrad, but at the same time he has suc-

ceeded in expressing through his work a personality unique and definitely American. *The Lay Anthony*, his first novel, is a slight story of a youth's innocence, his love, his fight against unkind fortune, and his death. *Mountain Blood* is a powerful Conradian story of a youth in a Pennsylvanian mountain village, who marries a rich girl and dissipates her money in an attempt to defeat the forces of local money-making rascality ; his rivals ruin and kill him, but he dies with the knowledge of victory. *The Three Black Pennys* is a study of heredity in three generations of Pennsylvanian ironmasters ; it is a good story, admirable for its characterization and its historical perspective. After *Gold and Iron*, a volume containing three short novels, ' Wild Oranges,' ' Tubal Cain,' and ' The Dark Fleece '—the first a story of the tropical shore of Florida, quite in the manner of Conrad—came *Java Head*, perhaps Mr. Hergesheimer's best work. It tells of a Salem sea-captain, Gerrit Ammidon, who, to save her life, marries a noble Manchu wife on one of his voyages, and brings her into the stubborn Presbyterian atmosphere of

his native town. He takes her to his home and introduces her to his father, Jeremy, a quaint old sailor, and his brother and sister-in-law, William and Rhoda Ammidon.

> Rhoda Ammidon gave an uncontrollable gasp as the Chinese woman sank in a fluttering prostration of colour at Jeremy's feet. He ejaculated, ' God bless me,' and started back. William's face was inscrutable, unguessed lines appeared about his severe mouth. Rhoda's own sensation was one of incredulity touched with mounting anger and feeling of outrage. The woman rose, but only to sink again before William : she was on her knees and, supported by her hands, bent forward and touched her forehead to the floor three times. Gerrit laughed shortly. ' She was to shake your hands ; we went over and over it on seaboard. But anything less than the *Kù l'on* was too casual for her.'
>
> She was now erect with a freer murmur of greeting to Rhoda. The latter was instantly aware of one certainty—Chinese she might be, she was, but no less absolutely aristocratic. Her face, oval and slightly flat, was plastered with paint on paint, but her gesture, the calm scrutiny of enigmatic black eyes under delicately arched brows, exquisite quiet hands, were all under the most admirable instinctive command. Rhoda said :

'I see that I am to welcome you for Gerrit's family.' The other, in slow lisping English, replied :

'Thank you greatly. I am humbled to the earth before your goodness.' . . .

Never before had Rhoda seen such lovely clothes : a long gown with wide sleeves of blue-black satin, embroidered in peach-coloured flower petals and innumerable minute sapphire and orange butterflies, a short sleeveless jacket of sage green caught with looped red jade buttons and threaded with silver, and indigo high-soled slippers crusted and tasselled with pearls. Her hair rose from the back in a smooth burnished loop. There were long pins of pink jade carved into blossoms, a quivering decoration of paper-thin gold leaves with moonstones in glistening drops, and a band of coral lotus buds. Pierced stone bracelets hung about her delicate wrists, fretted crystal balls swung from the lobes of her ears ; and clasped on the ends of several fingers were long pointed filigrees of ivory.

Gerrit had once been in love with a local girl, the very antithesis of his Eastern wife ; the latter commits suicide to escape the violence of the girl's brother, an opium-sodden ne'er-do-well. A courageous but somewhat unconvincing final chapter shows

us the widower marrying his first love. The book is beautifully written ; the characters of the Manchu, the opium fiend, and old Jeremy and his grandchildren, are all masterpieces.

Linda Condon is a tale of modern American life, in Mr. Hergesheimer's more sophisticated vein ; while *Cytherea* tells of a middle-aged man who elopes with the wife of a friend to Havana, where she dies from the heat and the excitement of her flight. Some short stories, collected under the title of *The Happy End*, are introduced in the dedication as having ' but one purpose—to give pleasure. . . . They brought me, in times of varying difficulty, food ; and for that excellent reason I am forced to conclude that, then as now, I am responsible to my grocer.' They are typical magazine stories, no better or worse than many others of their kind ; and they need not be taken too seriously into account.

Mr. Hergesheimer's search for local colour in *Cytherea* is described in his volume of Havana impressions, *San Cristóbal de la Habana* (where also may be found the plot

of his new novel *The Bright Shawl*), a book of great interest for the light it throws upon his artistic personality—and the contradictions contained in this. Any one who reads his works through will notice two things in particular: first, that his love of picturesque detail occasionally descends into what is little better than a catalogue; and secondly, that his style, usually so admirable, is capable of terrible lapses. Of the first there is no need to quote examples; they force themselves upon the reader. But to illustrate the second point, let us compare the famous opening paragraph of *The Three Black Pennys*:—

> A twilight like blue dust sifted into the shallow fold of the thickly wooded hills. It was early October, but a crisping frost had already stamped the maple trees with gold, the Spanish oaks were hung with patches of wine red, the sumach was brilliant in the darkening underbrush. A pattern of wild geese, flying low and unconcerned above the hills, wavered against the serene, ashen evening. Howat Penny, standing in the comparative clearing of a road, decided that the shifting, regular flight would not come close enough for a shot. He dropped the butt of

> his gun to the ground. Then he raised it again, examining the hammer; the flint was loose, unsatisfactory. There was a probability that it would miss firing.

with this not untypical sentence from *Cytherea*:—

> Their bags, put off, the rapid incomprehensible speech of the guard, left them, with the train moving doubtfully on, at Cobra.

Even the influence of Henry James is insufficient to explain this and similar passages.

In *San Cristóbal de la Habana* there are some autobiographical passages that will help to elucidate the duality of Mr. Hergesheimer's artistic equipment. He is of Pennsylvanian Dutch descent; 'unfortunately,' he says in one context, 'I had been born into the most rigid of all societies—a prosperous and Presbyterian middle-class; an influence that succeeded in making religion hideous before I was fifteen, planting in me, too, the belief that man was, in his instinctive life, filthy. I outgrew the latter, but never the first; and now, looking back, I could recognize how that lauded creed had nearly damned me to a hell far

surpassing in dreadfulness anything of its own bitter imagining. The cold metaphysical fog has saturated us all alike.' Elsewhere too he speaks of ' the mixture of my commonplace Presbyterian blood and incurable habit of romance.' Is not this mixture a guide to the incongruities in his writings ? He has sought out romance as a refuge from his gloomy upbringing and its traditions of Puritanism, dullness, and sordidness. When he is describing a Manchu lady in Salem he is safe ; but when he has to treat of characters less remote from daily life, he seeks to escape from his scruples by earnestly cataloguing every possible detail about them—and when he has to be deliberate in this, the strain of artificiality shows through. He wrote hard for ten years, from the age of thirty to forty, before success came to him ; now that it has come, there seems a danger that self-satisfaction may breed complacency in him. How otherwise could the man who wrote *Mountain Blood*, *The Three Black Pennys*, and *Java Head*, write the impudent dedication of *The Happy End* to his grocer, and the slack

sentences in *Cytherea* and part of *Linda Condon*?

Certainly both these books have excellent passages, the latter particularly, but they are not written with the same fire as his earlier work. The Puritan will out, in Mr. Hergesheimer as in Mark Twain; he shows its influence not least when he deliberately offends against it. Every revolt bears the marks of what it rebels against; Mr. Hergesheimer's lushness, his deliberate 'romance,' his love of detail—admirable in a description of a countryside or a Chinese dress, but tawdry when applied to a cocktail and a cigar—betray the intellectual barrenness of his upbringing.

He seems dimly aware of his own defect. Besides the personal passages quoted above, another paragraph from *San Cristóbal* is illuminating. It deals with Mr. Cabell's *Jurgen*:—

> My mind reverted to *Jurgen*, the remarkable narrative of James Cabell's, that had been suppressed; a summary act disturbing irony. For Mr. Cabell had spent a life, practically, drawn from the imagination of child-

> hood to the performance of maturity, in a mental preoccupation of disembodied purity, He had set up, in his heart and in his books, the high altar of an image of desire, never to be clasped, reached from earth ; a consolation, really, for the earth-bound. But that, in the mind, the characteristic mind, of America, had not had the weight, the value of a dandelion's gossamer seed. It was, definitely, a land that cared nothing for literature, the casting of transient life into the permanence of beautiful form.

And then there is this :—

> I wondered—a constant subject with me—when we 'd have a new vigorous American literature, a literature absolutely native, by men who had not, like myself, been to school to Turgeniev and the English lyrical poetry.

To this wistful passage we shall recur in a later chapter.

IV

No series of literary impressions of the younger contemporary American writers would be complete without mention of the dramatic work of Mr. Eugene O'Neill.

The son of a well-known actor (the late James O'Neill), the dramatist, who is still in his thirties, has become popular in America only since the War, owing first to the success of his play *Beyond the Horizon*, which ran for a considerable time in a New York theatre, and incidentally won its author the Pulitzer prize of $1000 as the best American play of 1920. The production of this play was due to the efforts of the Provincetown Players, a devoted group of theatrical producers, who have given Mr. O'Neill and many other young American dramatists their first public opportunities.

Several volumes of Mr. O'Neill's plays have been published.

The seven little pieces in *The Moon of the Caribbees* deal chiefly with seamen's life. The

action in most cases deals with the adventures of various members of the crew of a British tramp steamer or an American whaling vessel. They are dramatic sketches rather than finished work, and not much description of them is called for. In the first play, which gives its title to the book, the tramp is lying at anchor off a West Indian island. Native women smuggle drink aboard, and in a drunken riot one of the men is killed. *Bound East for Cardiff* describes the death of another of the hands on board the ship. In *Where the Cross is Made* Captain Bartlett is shown in the ' cabin ' he has built at the top of his house as a look-out post for a vessel he sent out three years before to search for a buried treasure. The vessel was wrecked and lost, but the old man refuses to accept the ruin of his hopes, and still insanely waits for it to return. His son has sent for a doctor to certify him as insane and have him removed to an asylum. Suddenly the old man is heard hailing his lost ship ; the forms of its lost crew enter, carrying the treasure ; the father and son both see them, although they are invisible to other persons.

The old man dies of heart-failure, but his obsession takes hold of his son, who goes mad of it. The other playlets in this book and in a still earlier volume, *Thirst*, are equally grim and fantastic.

These gruesome little pieces are more remarkable for their promise than their actual merit; but Mr. O'Neill's next and more ambitious work, *Beyond the Horizon*, reveals greater dramatic gifts. Andrew and Rob Mayo are the sons of a farmer. Their characters are very different; Rob is an impressionable and poetic youth who wishes to travel and see the world that lies 'beyond the horizon,' whereas Andrew is a hard-headed farmer. Their uncle, a sea-captain, arranges to take Rob on a three years' trip to the tropics with him, but on the day before he is to go Rob discovers that he loves his brother's sweetheart, Ruth, and that his love is returned. He decides to stay at home, and his brother goes away to sea in his place. The second act opens three years later; the farm has gone to ruin in Rob's impractical hands; his wife is a slut; and he is a disappointed man.

Ruth declares that she preferred his brother always; and that she is eagerly awaiting his return. But Andy comes back only to go away again at once to the Argentine to make his fortune, leaving the unhappy couple together. In the last act Rob is dying of consumption, and his brother, who is known to have become rich in the Argentine, returns again. But he has speculated on his way home and lost practically everything. To Ruth's disappointment he declares that he must go south once more and make another pile. Rob reviews their position :—

> 'I 'm a failure, and Ruth 's another—but we can both justly lay some of the blame for our stumbling on God. But you 're the deepest-dyed failure of the three, Andy.'

He asks Andy to marry Ruth after he dies, and crawls out secretly to the highway to die. Andy and Ruth find him there dead, and desperately agree to fulfil his last wish.

With *The Emperor Jones* and *Diff'rent* Mr. O'Neill greatly improved upon these earlier works. *Diff'rent* is a definitely unpleasant study of a woman's psychology.

The first scene is laid in a New England village in 1890. Emma Crosby is to marry Caleb Williams, a young whaling skipper. On the eve of their wedding she hears, through her brother, who tells her it as an amusing story, that Caleb, while his boat was lying at anchor by a West Indian Island, was visited in his cabin by a native woman who had swum out for a joke. She tells Caleb that she can now no longer agree to marry him; and the rough consolations of her mother and friends, who endeavour to excuse his lapse, are in vain. She agrees that it is human to err, but, she says, she thought Caleb was 'diff'rent.' Caleb declares that he will wait for her thirty years, if need be. The second act takes place in 1920. Emma is now an old maid of nearly fifty, but she has fallen in love with Benny, the shameless young twenty-year-old nephew of Caleb, a thief and a blackguard, who humours her for her money's sake and offers to marry her. Caleb returns from a cruise and pays Emma his usual visit; again he proposes to her, claiming that he has waited the thirty years of his

promise. She tells him that she is going to marry his nephew. After a terrible scene, in which Caleb tells her that his nephew is making her the laughing-stock of the village, he insists that an offer of money would make Benny desert her altogether. When the nephew returns, Emma repeats his uncle's offer to him and finds that he is indeed willing to take the money and desert her. Then the news is brought that Caleb has hanged himself in his barn ; and the curtain falls as Emma too goes off the stage to end her life.

We may turn now to *The Emperor Jones*. The scene is set ' on an island in the West Indies as yet unself-determined by White Marines.' It is one of those curious Black empires in the Caribbean Seas. As the curtain rises on the ' Emperor's ' palace, a white trader enters and meets a native woman. She tells him that she is escaping to the hills to join the rest of her countrymen ; the trader, a sneering, low-caste Englishman, comments gleefully on the fact that trouble is breaking out. The old woman runs away, and the Emperor enters.

He is a tall, powerfully built negro, in a fantastically bright uniform. Ridiculous as are his position and appearance, he is clearly a man of great cunning and will. Smithers tells him that a revolution has broken out, and takes a mean delight in the disclosure. But the Emperor, in a mixture of shrewdness and bragging, declares that he is not afraid of any of these 'bush-niggers,' that he has made his plan to escape through the forest to a bay on the other side of the island, where a French gunboat is lying which will carry him to America, where he has put away most of the wealth he has extorted from his foolish and superstitious 'subjects.'

He boasts of his former life in the United States as attendant on a Pullman car, murderer, convict, and prison-breaker, and contrasts it with his present position, or rather this as it was on the previous day. He knew that his rule could not last for ever, but he had reckoned upon another six months of power; but now, 'I cashes in and resigns de job of Emperor right dis minute.' He is sure that he can get away, with his carefully prepared plans. Besides,

he has persuaded the negroes that he is invulnerable to ordinary lead bullets.

Smithers:—'But supposin' somethin' 'appens wrong, an' they do nab you?'

Jones:—'Dey don't—dat 's de answer.'

Smithers:—'But, just for argyment's sake—what 'd you do?'

Jones:—'I 'se got five lead bullets in dis gun good enuff fo' common bush-niggers—an' after dat I got de silver bullet left to cheat 'em out o' gittin' me.'

Smithers:—'Ho, I was fergettin' that silver bullet. You 'll bump yourself orf in style, won't yer?'

Jones:—'You kin bet yo' whole roll on one thing, white man. Dis baby plays out his string to de end, and when he quits, he quits with a bang de way he ought. Silver bullet ain't none too good for him when he go, dat 's a fact! Sho'! What is I talkin' about? Ain't come to dat yit, an' I never will—not wid trash niggers like dese yere. Silver bullet will bring me luck anyway. I kin outguess, outrun, outfight, an' outplay de whole lot o' dem all ovah de board any time o' de day or night! You watch me!'

A tom-tom starts beating with a regular throb that is maintained to the very end of the play. 'That 's for you,' says Smithers.

The negroes are holding a war-dance and putting their wizards and ghost-raisers on the track of Jones. The Emperor declares that he was a ' member o' good standin' in de Baptist Church ' when he was working on the Pullmans and is consequently not to be frightened by witchcraft ; but actually he is a little uneasy in his inmost heart. However, he puts on a brave face—' I tells you I 'se safe 's 'f I was in New York City '—and starts off for the forest, not by any hidden door but by the main entrance to his palace.

> ' Does you think I 'd slink out de back door like a common nigger ? I 'se Emperor yit, ain't I ? And de Emperor Jones leaves de way he comes, and dat black trash don't dare stop him—leastways, not yit. Listen to dat roll-call, will yo' ? Must be mighty big drum carry dat far. Well, if dey ain't got no whole brass band to see me off, I sho' got de drum part of it ! So long, white man ! '

And whistling a tune he goes out into the plain, with three hours' start of sunset and his rebellious subjects.

The rest of the play, with the exception of a few lines at the end, is a monologue

with ghostly interludes, accompanied all the time by the incessant throb of the tom-tom. First we see Emperor Jones reaching the forest at nightfall. He throws himself on the ground and talks to himself, with a strange mixture of satisfaction and nervousness. He pulls off his shoes and congratulates his feet on the excellent way they have so far supported him. 'Feet, yo' is holding up yo' end fine, and I su'tinly hopes you ain't blistering none. It 's time you git a rest. You is still in the pink—on'y a little mite feverish. Cool yo'selves. Remember yo' done got a long journey yit befo' yo'.' As he remarks, 'Dat soft Emperor job ain't no training for a long hike ovah dat plain in de brilin' sun'; but he decides that all that is wrong with him is hunger, and searches round for the food he had hidden in expectation of some such inevitable escape. He cannot find it, and, lighting a match to search for the place, remembers that he must not disclose where he is. Strange eyes peer at him through the darkness, and he hears laughter. Scared, he pulls out his revolver and fires at the

nearest shape. It disappears, and again he tries to pull himself together.

> 'Gorry, you give de game away when yo' fire dat shot. Dem niggers hear dat fo' su'tin. Time yo' beat it in de woods widout no long waits. Git in, nigger! What yo' skeered at? Ain't nothin' dere but de trees! Git in!'

The next scene is three hours later, in the middle of the woods. Jones enters, rather dishevelled. 'Dis am a long night fo' yo', yo' Majesty,' he says to himself. 'Majesty! Der ain't much majesty 'bout dis baby now.' He hears a rattling noise, and, turning, sees a negro, dressed in a Pullman attendant's uniform, rattling a dice-box. It is a man whom he killed long ago in a gambling row. He pulls out his revolver and shoots at the apparition. Once more he realizes that he has given his position away, and turns and flees among the trees. The next scene is two hours later. Jones is half-dead with exhaustion. He has lost his way, and his continual chatter has become more frightened.

He throws off his coat and his spurs. Terror seizes him, and he vainly reminds himself that the Baptist clergyman in the old

days assured him that ghosts do not exist. Suddenly we see before him the figures of a prison gang in which he once worked. The white gaoler lashes him with a whip. Jones seizes his revolver and shoots him.

> ' I kills you, you white debil, if it 's the last thing I evah does ! Ghost or debil, I kill you again ! '

The phantoms disappear. The noise of the tom-tom, which has accompanied him throughout his flight, grows louder and more insistent. We find him two hours later lying exhausted in another part of the forest. He is calling upon the Lord to save him from his fears. Suddenly a body of men and women in old-time dress surround him, and he is motioned by one of them to ascend a tree-stump. In dumb show he is auctioned by a white auctioneer and sold to one of the onlookers. He has passed in his hallucinations from the memories of his own past to that of his race, the American negroes. From this point on it is the ' unconscious mind ' of his race that haunts him. He fires two shots at the auctioneer, and the figures are blotted out.

He has now used all his lead bullets and has only the silver one left. Again two hours pass. He is still in the forest, moaning with fear and weariness. A light appears at the back of the stage, and there is seen the hold of a slave-ship, with half a dozen poor negroes tugging at the oars. Jones takes his place among them and pulls at the oars in time with the others until he suddenly realizes that they are phantoms, and rushes off among the trees. Another two hours pass and Jones stumbles into a curious landscape. It is the Congo, the original home of his people. A witch-dancer enters, whining and prancing. He points to a crocodile in the river, and seems to order Jones to sacrifice himself to it. Jones cries out, 'Mercy, O Lawd! Mercy! Mercy on this poor sinner. . . . Lawd, save me! Lawd Jesus, hear my prayer!' The crocodile opens its mouth to devour him; but he remembers the silver bullet and fires at the crocodile. The light dies out, with Jones lying cowed on the ground. The tom-tom beats more insistently than ever.

The next and last scene is at dawn. The

trader, Smithers, is talking to the rebels who are tracking Jones. They are at the very place where he entered the forest twelve hours before. Shots are heard and the tom-tom abruptly ceases. The head man tells Smithers that his men have been making silver bullets during the night to shoot Jones with, since lead ones would be useless against him. The men re-enter, bearing the dead body of the Emperor. Smithers salutes him mockingly and utters the last words of the play to the leader of the pursuers :—

> ' I s'pose you think it 's yer charms and yer silly beatin' the drum that made 'im run in a circle when 'e 'd lorst 'imself, don't yer ? . . . Stupid as 'ogs the lot of 'em ! Blarsted niggers ! '

This curious play is unlikely to make as strong an impression in print as when it is acted. But even from the inadequate description that has been given of it here one may see what an interesting experiment the play is. In it Mr. O'Neill may be said to have solved the problem which has for so long vexed the imagination of European

playwrights, particularly the Russians, to discover a new form of drama. As has been pointed out, the play is practically a monologue, with the sound of the tom-tom beaten by the chief character's pursuers as the antagonist in the drama. The effect of this play in a theatre is amazing : one feels as if one were assisting at a mystery—a sensation that surely few modern plays have ever produced upon their audiences.

It was a matter of the greatest interest whether Mr. O'Neill, after the success of *The Emperor Jones*, would follow his own lead farther, or whether he would develop his art rather on the lines of his *Diff'rent*. If he could write more plays of the calibre of *The Emperor Jones*, one felt that he would rank high among living dramatists. But from *Diff'rent* to banality was not a far step. His next play, *Gold*, produced in 1921, did not answer this question, for it was to a large extent an amplification of *Where the Cross is Made*, which was referred to above.

The Straw, which appeared at about the same time, was also of no great importance.

It was the story of a consumptive girl sent reluctantly by her drunken father to a sanatorium, where she meets a young journalist who is discharged cured while she grows weaker ; he returns to the sanatorium in time to encourage her to struggle to get better. The play is competent and has good scenes—Mr. O'Neill seems incapable of writing badly—but it is not better than many others of the same type.

But the publication of *The Hairy Ape*, *Anna Christie* (awarded the Pulitzer prize in 1922), and *The First Man* allows a further judgment to be made. *The First Man* is an inferior work, and does not need much consideration. It is the story of an archaeologist and his wife who, losing their little children through the carelessness of a nurse, decide to have no more and to devote themselves solely to scientific research. They are going to Central Asia in the hope of discovering the cradle of the human race, when suddenly it is discovered that the wife is *enceinte*. The husband's wrath is shared by his family, who firmly believe that the child's father is another man. The

wife dies in childbirth, and the husband, after cursing the newborn baby and refusing even to see it before he leaves for Asia, suddenly realizes the meaning of his family's sympathy ; he abuses them for their unjust suspicions, acknowledges the baby, hands it over to an affectionate aunt, the only humane member of his ultra-respectable Puritan family, and departs on his voyage. The other relatives are not convinced by his anger, but are contented that, by recognizing the baby, he has scotched the scandal they have simultaneously nourished and feared. The motive and characters of this play have more interest for America than they can have for England ; but even so, one cannot consider the play as enhancing O'Neill's reputation.

Anna Christie is interesting as a blend of two of the author's styles ; in it the O'Neill of the sea playlets and the O'Neill of *Beyond the Horizon* collaborate in a poignant little drama. It tells of an old Scandinavian-American sailor, familiar to readers of the sea-plays, who fears ' the old devil, sea,' and sends his infant daughter to a farm far

away in the interior of the country, in order that she may be saved from its wiles. She is now twenty years old. He has told her that he has given up the sea and is a house-porter in New York. He receives a letter from her to say she is coming to visit him at the New York dockside bar which is his only address. She arrives, and it is obvious to every one but her father that she is a prostitute ; he thinks her an innocent girl and fathers her, overcoming her cynical distrust by the obvious genuineness of his affection. On board his barge—he tells her that he captains the barge for his health's sake—she meets a shipwrecked sailor who falls in love with her. The father is frantically jealous, and determined that she shall not marry a sailor ; the two men fight, and appeal to her for her decision. Heart-broken, she tells them both of her life—how the farm life to which her father consigned her drove her to her present profession. Her father stumbles off the barge to drown himself in drink ; the lover forsakes her. But he returns in the last act, forces her to swear that she had no

pleasure from the men she met in her immoral life, and all ends happily with marriage and the two men, father and husband, signing on for an ocean voyage next day. The story is powerful up to the last act, but this is an almost ludicrous attempt to graft a happy ending to a tragic story.

The Hairy Ape, on the other hand, is superior to all Mr. O'Neill's plays except *The Emperor Jones*, the one it most resembles in style. These two plays are his great achievement; the rest do not properly show the amazing tragic quality that is in him. The story of *The Hairy Ape* is highly original. The first scene shows the firemen's quarters on a great Transatlantic liner, one hour out of New York. The low ceiling, the rows of steel bunks, and the general air of confinement and rigidity constrain the men, and with their stoop, their strongly developed muscles, and their savagery, they seem like primitive men, almost apes. Yank, their leader, is proud of his strength and his work—he 'belongs,' as he says, and his contempt for the

soft-handed passengers and the shirkers is unbounded.

> 'Wot 's dem slobs in de foist [=first] cabin got to do wit us? We 're better men dan dey are, ain't we? Sure! One of us guys could clean up de whole mob wit one mit. Put one of 'em down here for one watch in de stokehole, what 'd happen? Dey 'd carry him off on a stretcher. Dem boids don't amount to nothin'. Dey 're just baggage. Who makes dis old tub run? Ain't it us guys? Well den, we belong, don't we? We belong and dey don't. Dat 's all!'

To a socialist seaman who says they are slaves, he replies :—

> 'Slaves, hell! We run de whole woiks. All de rich guys dat tink dey 're somep'n, dey ain't nothin'! Dey don't belong. But us guys, we 're in de move, we 're at de bottom, de whole ting is us!'

The scene shifts to the promenade deck, where the artificial and pampered daughter of the Steel Trust magnate who is the president of the line arranges to visit the stokehold with some of the engineers. She goes down and enters the horrible place where the fires are fed by Yank and his

sweating gang, just at the moment when Yank is blind with rage against one of the engineers. He is cursing him foully when he turns and sees the slender, white-faced, white-clad millionaire's daughter. She shrinks back at the sight of the man and his horrible surroundings, crying, 'Take me away! Oh, the filthy beast,' and is carried out fainting just as Yank, mad with fury, hurls his shovel at her.

Yank, back in his quarters, is thinking, trying to think. His friends jeer at him and ask him if he has fallen in love. 'I 've fallen in hate,' he says. The others remind him how the girl fell back when she saw him; 'sure,' says one of them, 'twas as if she 'd seen a great hairy ape escaped from the Zoo.' Yank wants to rush on deck and kill her; the others restrain him and he cries, 'Lemme up! I 'll show her who 's a ape.' He tries to catch her as she leaves the ship at Southampton, but fails, and we meet him next back in New York, watching the church parade on Fifth Avenue. He wants to impede and insult the passers-by, but they all walk round

him as if he was a stone, saying mechanically, ' I beg your pardon,' when he pushes into them. An old gentleman, running for a bus, knocks him off his balance; Yank rises and hits him with all his force full in the face, but the old gentleman takes no notice except to say, ' I beg your pardon ' ; then, realizing that he has lost his bus, he calls a policeman to arrest Yank.

Yank, badly manhandled by the police, comes to in one of a row of prison cells and imagines at first that he is really a hairy ape in a zoo. The other prisoners laugh at him, learn the story of his madness, and, telling him that the girl's father is the president of the Steel Trust, advise him to join the I.W.W.—the International Workers of the World, alias the ' Wobblies ' —and get his revenge. Yank breaks the bars of his cage with his enormous strength, but the guards force him back with a hose.

Released at last, he goes to the I.W.W., but his talk of violence and revenge makes the organizers think that he is an *agent provocateur*, and they throw him out.

Not even among the 'wobblies' does he 'belong.'

The last scene shows a cage in the New York Zoo. A huge gorilla is sitting inside it in the same attitude as Yank has so often been shown—'in the exact attitude of Rodin's "The Thinker"' is Mr. O'Neill's often repeated and somewhat naïve stage-direction. Yank enters and addresses the ape. 'Ain't we both members of de same club—de Hairy Apes?' He interprets its brooding thoughts. 'Say, how d' yuh feel sittin' in dat pen all de time, havin' to stand for 'em comin' and starin' at yuh —de white-faced, skinny tarts and de boobs what marry 'em—makin' fun of yuh, laughin' at yuh, gittin' scared at yuh —damn 'em.'

Then an idea comes to him, 'Are yuh game?' he asks the gorilla. 'Dey 've looked at youse, ain't dey—in a cage? Wanter git even? Wanter wind up like a sport instead of creakin' slow in dere?'

The gorilla roars assent. Yank takes out a jemmy and forces the lock of the cage.

'Step out and shake hands! I 'll take yuh

for a walk down Fif' Avenue.' The brute comes out of the cage and Yank offers him a hand to shake ; but the gorilla seizes him in its arms and, breaking his back, throws him into the cage and shambles away.

' Even him didn't tink I belonged,' moans Yank, and then, taking courage, he pulls himself up by the bars, and with a mocking laugh cries, ' In de cage, huh ? Ladies and gents, step forward and take a slant at de one and only—one and original—Hairy Ape from de wilds of——' and falls dead. ' And perhaps,' remarks the author sentimentally, ' the Hairy Ape at last " belongs." '

The art, the originality, and the force of *The Hairy Ape* make it a worthy successor to *The Emperor Jones*. While one must praise the skill and sincerity of Mr. O'Neill's more conventional plays — *Beyond the Horizon* and *Anna Christie*, for example— it is nevertheless the tragedies of Jones and Yank that show his promise at its greatest.

The fact that he has been able to write *The Hairy Ape* shows that his earlier masterpiece was no mere flash in the pan ; in

criticizing his work hitherto I have carefully avoided superlatives, but to-day I do not hesitate to say that, in my opinion, he is the greatest living tragic dramatist.[1]

[1] Mr. O'Neill's latest play, *The Fountain*, is said to be a drama in poetic prose, describing Ponce de Léon's search for the Fountain of Youth.

V

EVERY traveller to New York is assured by his friends there that he must not take that city as fully representative of America. He is warned that New York, a cosmopolitan centre, and the whole New England country (Boston, etc.) are not the real America at all ; if he wants to find this, he is told, he must go inland, into that huge expanse, filled with innumerable towns and villages, which is known as the ' Middle West.'

Similarly the student of literature is advised to direct his attention to the literary output of Chicago and the other Middle Western centres ; the New York writers, he is told, are not as fully representative of the country as those who spring from its centre. The visitor may feel that this concern is exaggerated and that, whatever its deficiencies, New York is probably as representative of literary America as London, say, is of England ; the claims of Manchester, for

example, may occur to him as a parallel to those of Chicago. But, however this may be, it is certainly necessary to emphasize the claims of the Middle West to consideration in treating of the more recent literature of America.

The most interesting figures in contemporary American prose writing who belong definitely to the Middle West are Theodore Dreiser, Edgar Lee Masters, Willa Cather, Sinclair Lewis, and Sherwood Anderson. Of Dreiser's novels, which are the major part of his work, it is unnecessary to speak at length here, especially since a complete edition of them is expected to appear shortly in England, but some comment upon them is called for. Mr. Arnold Bennett is said to have praised him as the greatest American novelist of the day; this criticism has a double force, because Mr. Dreiser resembles the author of *The Old Wives' Tale* more than any other living English writer. Dreiser began his career with *Sister Carrie* and *Jenny Gerhardt*; *The Financier* was the first of a 'Trilogy of Desire,' which was continued with its sequel *The Titan* and the

ill-fated *The 'Genius.'* *The Titan* is, I think, the best of his novels; the figure of Cowperwood, the financier, reckless, daring, mediaeval in his ruthlessness, love of luxury, and lust for women, is a marvellous piece of work. *The 'Genius'* is a curiously parallel study of an artist who forsakes his art for a successful journalistic career, shot through with affairs with women. Why this book should have brought down the thunders of the Society of the Suppression of Vice upon its author is a mystery. One can understand, without pardoning it, the suppression of *Jurgen*; but *The 'Genius'* is not an erotic book in any sense. Mr. Dreiser is now preparing a new novel, but for the last few years he has confined himself to two volumes of plays—*Plays of the Natural and the Supernatural* and *The Hand of the Potter* —the former curious but of no great merit, the latter a very disagreeable study of a deformed and criminal lunatic; a couple of books of short stories, *Free and Other Stories* (also of little importance) and the delightful *Twelve Men*, which contains some excellent autobiographical passages;

and a dull book of essays, *Hey Rub-a-Dub-Dub*.

Mr. Dreiser's erratic, prolix, and yet monumental style is so American, so completely typical of the vast country from which he comes, that he is as much a cultural as a literary figure. Let any one compare his first book *Sister Carrie*, which was cut down to half its original size by some unknown editor before publication, with any of his later works, and the difference will at once be seen between Mr. Dreiser as he would be, were he an English writer, and what he is as an American, not to say a Middle Westerner. An early incident in his life is typical of the man. He was once obliged to take the post of editor of a series of ' dime novels ' for a New York publishing house, and was given a number of long novelettes to reduce to a more economical length ; the method he adopted was to split the manuscripts in two and write a new ending to the first part and a new beginning to the second, thus making two novelettes where there had before been only one. (The publishers, needless to say, were delighted at this

doubling of their material.) As Mr. Mencken has pointed out in a sympathetic study of Mr. Dreiser's work—it may be mentioned that Mr. Mencken was the prime mover in the movement of protest against the suppression of *The 'Genius,'* and has accumulated an extraordinary *dossier* of letters from celebrated American authors, critics, and editors in regard to this—he has no notion whatever of such sophistications as verbal economy :—

> Turn to page 700 of *The 'Genius.'* By the time one gets there, one has hewn and hacked one's way through more than 700 large pages of fine print—97 long chapters, more than 250,000 words. And yet, at this hurried and impatient point, with the *coda* already begun, Dreiser halts the whole narrative to explain the origin, nature, and inner meaning of Christian Science, and to make us privy to a lot of chatty stuff about Mrs. Althea Jones, a professional healer, and to supply us with detailed plans and specifications of the apartment house in which she lives, works her tawdry miracles, and has her being.

An English publisher would probably feel justified in cutting his manuscripts and also,

perhaps, would venture a protest against the amount of bad writing and clichés that disfigure his work. But these defects are characteristic. An interesting glance at Mr. Dreiser's psychology may be gained from reading his travel books, *A Traveller at Forty*, in which he describes a tour in Europe, and *A Hoosier Holiday*, an account of an automobile journey from New York to his early homes in Indiana. American friends tell me that they find *A Hoosier Holiday* the most revealing of Mr. Dreiser's books ; but for the English reader this place must be taken by *A Traveller at Forty*. On every page of his experiences in England, France, Italy, and Germany, one finds a touch of his simple, broad, cumulative personality.

He tells us of the tips he gave on board ship, and how he forgot to pack his rug, and similar trivialities, side by side with his reflections upon life in general, and his often very interesting wayside encounters and conversations. With the last there is no need to concern ourselves here, but one must mention his occasional philosophic observations and his comparisons between

Europe and America. Take this, for example :—

> So I packed—will you believe it ?—a little sadly. I think most of us are a little silly at times, only we are cautious enough to conceal it. There is in me the spirit of a lonely child somewhere, and it clings pitifully to the hand of its big mamma, Life, and cries when it is frightened ; and then there is a coarse, vulgar exterior which fronts the world defiantly and bids all and sundry go to the devil. It sneers and barks and jeers bitterly at times and guffaws and chuckles and has a joyous time laughing at the follies of others.

A not less characteristically naïve passage is this :—

> I conceive of life as a blind goddess, pouring from separate jars, one of which she holds in each hand, simultaneously, the streams of good and evil, which mingling, make this troubled existence, flowing ever onward to the sea.

Comparing America and Europe, he writes as follows :—

> No one could be more crude, more illusioned than the average American. In *savoir faire*, life understanding, the philosophic acceptance of definite conditions in nature, the Europeans

> are immeasurably superior. They are harder, better trained, more settled in the routine of things. The folderols of romance, the shibboleths of politics and religion, the false standards of social and commercial supremacy are not so readily accepted there [Europe] as here [America]. Ill-founded aspiration is not so rife there as here; every Jack does not consider himself, regardless of qualifications, appointed by God to tell his neighbour how he shall do and live. But, granting all this, America, and particularly New York, has to me the most comforting atmosphere of any. . . . All in all, the Atlantic metropolis is the first city in the world to me—first in force, unrivalled in individuality, richer and freer in its spirit than London or Paris, though so often more gauche, more tawdry, more shamblingly inexperienced.

The key to so much that is Dreiserian is to be found in his racial ancestry. As he tells us in the same book, he had a German father, and his mother was of Pennsylvanian Dutch extraction. 'I am not English but radically American.' This is indeed the essence of the man, and of what he stands for in contemporary American life. He is the unconscious mouthpiece of the non-English popu-

lation of America. The traditions of the leading cultural class, the Anglo-Saxon New Englanders, are strange and unsympathetic to him, as he is to those who hold them.

He is essentially the voice of revolt against the English tradition in America, the representative of the vast, bewildered, latently powerful immigrant races that do not understand or do more than pretend to appreciate the current standards of American civilization. He stands for the Continental young American of the Middle West.

His is no longer a solitary voice. In the works of Miss Willa Cather the reader will find, expressed certainly in a very different manner, an emphasis laid upon certain of the non-English American classes, the Scandinavian and Bohemian settlers. Miss Cather herself began her career in the Middle West. Her first stories were sent to a New York paper ; and she was invited by a sympathetic editor to join its staff. Since then she has published several novels and a couple of volumes of short stories. Her first novel was *Alexander's Bridges*, a short book dealing with Boston and London life ; it is of no

real importance. Soon afterwards she began to write novels dealing with the early Swedish and Bohemian settlers in the Nebraska prairies, of which the best are *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*. Recently she has collected some of her previously published short stories dealing chiefly with artistic circles in New York and life in Middle Western towns, and they have appeared under the title of *Youth and the Bright Medusa*. Of these books, those dealing with the immigrants in Nebraska are by far the best. *O Pioneers!* describes the life of a Swedish settler's daughter and the tragic love of her brother Emil for a beautiful Bohemian girl, Marie Tovesky. *My Antonia* (the accent is on the first syllable of the name) is a tale told by Jim Burden, a lawyer from the Middle West. Taken to the West as a child, he travels on the same train as a family of Bohemian immigrants, the Shimerdas, who have a daughter Antonia. The two children grow up together amidst the hardships of the settlers' life. Their ways part at last; poor Antonia is seduced by a scoundrelly Irish railwayman, but afterwards she marries

a decent farmer of her own people and has a family of fine, healthy children. It is a simple tale, but full of charm and interest; besides Antonia's own experiences, we read of those of other Bohemian girls, her friends, who, though despised by the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants of the country (but not by their young men), succeed none the less in bringing a certain Continental atmosphere of gaiety and vitality into the arid existence of the Middle West. There are many excellent descriptions of life and people in the two books—of the French fair, for example, in *O Pioneers!* and of the Bohemian family, some Russian settlers, and a blind negro musician in *My Antonia*. It would be easy to make many quotations from these books, but two from the later one must suffice.

Jim Burden is revisiting Antonia after many years' absence :—

> I was thinking about Antonia and her children; about Anna's solicitude for her, Ambrosch's grave affection, Leo's jealous, animal little love. That moment, when they all came tumbling out of the cave into the light, was a sight any man might have come

far to see. Antonia had always been one to leave images in the mind that did not fade—that grew stronger with time. In my memory there was a succession of such pictures fixed there like the old woodcuts of one's first primer: Antonia kicking her bare legs against the sides of my pony when we came home in triumph with our snake; Antonia in her black shawl and fur cap, as she stood by her father's grave in the snowstorm; Antonia coming in with her work team along the evening sky-line. She lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true. I had not been mistaken. She was a battered woman now, not a lovely girl; but she still had that something which fires the imagination, could still stop one's breath for a moment by a look or gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things. She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab-tree and look up at the apples, to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last. All the strong things of her heart came out in her body, that had been so tireless in serving generous emotions.

It was no wonder that her sons stood tall and straight. She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races.

And then there is this passage, also sym-

bolical of the fertile promise of the mighty Middle West :—

> There were no clouds, the sun was going down in a limpid, gold-washed sky. Just as the lower edge of the red disc rested on the high fields against the horizon, a great black figure suddenly appeared on the face of the sun. We sprang to our feet, straining our eyes towards it. In a moment we realized what it was. On some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just behind it. Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the disc ; the handles, the tongue, the share—black against the molten red. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun.
>
> Even while we whispered about it, our vision disappeared ; the ball dropped and dropped until the red tip went beneath the earth. The fields below us were dark, the sky was growing pale, and that forgotten plough had sunk back to its own littleness somewhere on the prairie.

It remains only to be said that Miss Willa Cather has published a new novel, *One of Ours*. The first half of the book, dealing with life in the Western prairies, is, as an American reviewer has said, an admirable

' picture—scarce sketched before—of the new and mechanical type of farming which has been replacing the earlier isolated agriculture ' ; Miss Cather never wrote better. But the second half, which professes to recount the hero's war experiences, is extraordinarily poor stuff. The moment this writer leaves the West, she loses all the qualities that make her so interesting a phenomenon in the American literary field of to-day.

It is her high achievement in *My Antonia* and *O Pioneers !* that she has brought out the beauty and the mystery of her country ; as Mr. Dreiser in his works has shown us its strength and its bulk. To read their books is to be made to understand what racial contrasts and incongruities are contained in modern American life, until at last the old idea of the ' melting-pot ' seems less a romantic fact than a prosaic aspiration.

The immigrants may change, as Miss Cather shows them to do, their national songs and dresses for vulgar rag-time ditties and ugly ' waists,' but there are certain spiritual qualities that they cannot lose.

VI

THE outstanding recent American literary success is Mr. Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*.

Mr. Lewis had written several novels of promise—*Our Mr. Wrenn* (the best); *The Trail of the Hawk*, *The Job*, and *Free Air*—but without achieving success. *Main Street*, however, was reprinted more than a dozen times in less than four months from its first appearance; at least half a million copies have been sold and the demand still continues. *Main Street* is essentially an American book, and a good American book. I do not know what its sales have been in England since its publication here, but, if one may judge from reviews, it is unlikely to be very popular. This is natural enough; for, though it is one of the most important American books that have appeared for a long time, it is one that the foreign reader cannot hope to appreciate without some explanation of its character.

The story is simple enough. A young

University girl marries a doctor from a small Middle Western township—Gopher Prairie, Minnesota—and goes there with him to live.

Her first glimpse of Main Street—in England we should call it ' High Street '—the chief thoroughfare of the little prairie town, distresses her. She finds the town and its inhabitants crude and dull. As the doctor's wife she meets all the ' best ' society of the place, but without encountering a single person with whom she has anything in common. They are mean, wearisome, self-satisfied. She hates them, and they hate her.

The only persons of interest are a Swedish workman, Miles Bjornstam, who is the local Socialist ; her Swedish servant girl, who afterwards marries Miles ; and a young Swede, a tailor's assistant. All these, of course, are despised by the respectable inhabitants of *Main Street*. She endures the maddeningly tedious and pretentious life of the little town as long as she can ; but when the War comes she escapes to Washington and the fresh air of a big town. In the last chapter we find her returning to Gopher Prairie with her husband. The book has no ending, either

happy or sad ; for there is no easy solution to the problem of *Main Street*.

The story after all does not much matter ; for the essential part of the book is its description of the crash between the culture of the more or less civilized Eastern American cities and the arid self-complacency of the Middle Western small towns, ' as planless as a scattering of paper boxes on an attic floor.'

The importance of *Main Street* lies in its merciless, sardonic study of Middle Western life. This, Mr. Lewis seems to say, this is the life that all good, patriotic Americans hold up to each other and to the world as the high-water mark of domestic civilization ; these are the standards of taste and opinion that young America is urged to support and follow. The book, to any one who has a first-hand experience of American life, is a vivid social satire, the more persuasive in that its purpose is never underlined, never even stated. It is the book that Mark Twain ought to have written in his own style. After the first enormous vogue of *Main Street* one now hears many objections to it ; it is said to be exaggerated, to be too severe. But it

is difficult to see how these complaints can be sustained. In the first place, the chapters are as obvious as photographs. The cruelly nerve-racking adventures of Carol, the heroine, with the men and the women of Gopher Prairie, her vain attempts to educate the town, her disgust with the snobbishness of the people and the sordid atmosphere of their lives and upbringing, her delight at the colour that the non-English immigrants, a despised class, bring into the place—the last the underlying idea, as we have seen, of so much of Miss Willa Cather's work—all this is too real to be dismissed, even partially, as malicious or exaggerated. Mr. Lewis is perfectly honest with his readers :—

> Doubtless all small towns, in all countries, in all ages . . . have a tendency to be not only dull but mean, bitter, infested with curiosity. In France or Tibet quite as much as in Wyoming or Indiana these timidities are inherent in isolation.

The reader may recall Knut Hamsun's recent book about a Norwegian small town. It was greeted in an American paper as a 'Norwegian *Main Street*.'

Mr. Lewis continues :—

> But a village in a country which is taking pains to become altogether standardized and pure, which aspires to succeed Victorian England as the chief mediocrity of the world, is no longer merely provincial, no longer downy and restful in its leaf-shadowed ignorance. It is a force seeking to dominate the earth, to drain the hills and seas of colour, to set Dante at boosting Gopher Prairie, and to dress the high gods in 'Klassy Kollege Klothes.' Sure of itself, it bullies other civilizations, as a travelling salesman in a brown Derby conquers the wisdom of China and tacks advertisements of cigarettes over arches for centuries dedicated to the sayings of Confucius.
>
> Such a society functions admirably in the large production of cheap automobiles, dollar watches, and safety razors. But it is not satisfied until the entire world also admits that the end and joyous purpose of living is to ride in cheap automobiles, to make advertizing pictures of dollar watches, and in the twilight to sit talking not of love and courage but of the convenience of safety razors.
>
> And such a society, such a nation, is determined by the Gopher Prairies.

In fact, Main Street is present-day America at its most intolerable.

This quotation is not at all a fair test of Mr. Lewis's qualities; if he occasionally uses, for purposes of his own, the dialect and emphases of Main Street, he is also capable of excellent descriptive writing. His picture of Mrs. Bogart, for example, 'a widow, and a prominent Baptist, and a Good Influence,' whose three sons have run amuck as the result of her careful training of them, and whose mind, with its amazing interest in vice and its suppression, is the foulest thing in the sordid atmosphere of Main Street, is an excellent piece of delineation. One is tempted to generalize about American characteristics on the basis of nearly every chapter of this book.[1] It sums up brilli-

[1] In Mr. Mencken's *Prejudices: First Series* there is an essay entitled 'Portrait of an Immortal Soul' in which the writer relates how the manuscript of an autobiographical novel, *One Man*, was sent to him for his opinion, and how, after revision, he had it published, the author's identity concealed under the pseudonym of 'Robert Steele.' This was in 1915. The book was ignored by the critics and its publication was a complete failure. The plot is as follows:

The autobiographical hero, after a sordidly criminal youth, comes at last to acquiesce in his parents' Puritan belief that he is a limb of Satan and can never come to good, whatever he attempts. At first he strives to make himself a better Puritan, but for every step forward he takes two backwards, assisted by the outraged conscience of his fellows.

As Mr. Mencken says, it is not until he resigns himself

antly and mercilessly everything that the new generation in America detests. If *Main Street* is read with this in mind, the English reader should enjoy it, long as it is; but it is a great pity if the book is to be taken as just a novel, as any other novel might be, of small-town life in the Middle West. It is perhaps as good a sign of the American renaissance of to-day as anything could be that the public throughout the United States is buying and reading this book; without such willing self-analysis

frankly to the fact of his incurable degradation, and so ceases to struggle against it, that he ever steps out of it. But he goes through a great deal before this happens. He steals money by various devices and is sent to prison for a term, his father refusing to acknowledge certain cheques that the youth has forged in his name. When he comes out of gaol he vacillates between honesty (as the best policy) and theft (as the easiest), and at the same time takes part in half a dozen affairs with various women. After every debauch he has a moral fit of remorse; his life becomes a string of mornings after. He is trapped into marrying the cast-off mistress of his employer, who is, however, so overcome by his simplicity that she tells him the truth. Then his employer's wife falls in love with him, and while he does not hesitate to take advantage of the fact, he shrinks from recognizing that he is taking revenge for his wrong, and, when the lawyers offer him five hundred dollars to surrender her letters and give her up, he agrees after devout prayers for divine guidance and takes the money, using it partly to pay for his divorce from his wife and sending the rest to an orphanage. He is incapable of a fine gesture even of the nastiest kind. After this moral

there would be little hope for the intellectual future of the country.

Mr. Lewis has followed up *Main Street* with another equally successful novel, *Babbitt*, which carries this exposure of conventional American life a stage higher. This time, instead of Gopher Prairie, a small town of twenty-five hundred inhabitants, we are introduced to Zenith, with a third of a million inhabitants, a typical American big town, of the type of Minneapolis, Detroit, and fifty others. As one of the characters remarks with pride, Zenith is so like other

moment he gets better and better. He has his little relapses into vice, but he is gratified to notice that, the older he gets, the more remorseful he becomes next day. Then at last—not for the first time—he learns what it is truly to love, but now he has become so Puritan that he hesitates for a long time before offering to marry a girl whom he knows to have been compromised with other men before him. Having spent half his life thinking himself too vile to consort with other men, he now sets his immortal soul on a pinnacle and considers whether he is justified in allying himself to a fallen creature. After long struggles and prayers he decides to let the Puritan world rip and marries the girl. He has now settled down, Mr. Mencken tells us, to writing the story of her life, under the mistaken idea that he is a born writer. Had this book been published in the same year as *Main Street* and the other novels of a similar type, which are devoted to revelations or attempts at revelations of the soul of the American people, it would surely have created the interest it deserves. But it was certainly published six years ahead of its time.

American cities of the same kind that, if one of its inhabitants is in any other of them, he has only to go to the best hotel in the place and he can at once feel himself back at home, for everything, intellectually, architecturally, materially is identical. We see Babbitt, a standard American citizen, with his standard family and friends—he is a real estate dealer —busy with standard deals on behalf of standard clients and standard speculators; he has a standard house and a standard car, standard pleasures and standard virtues and vices. When he shakes a cocktail for his friends, he makes standard remarks and his guests make standard witticisms in reply.

But somehow or other he has an urge to escape from this standard environment; in the absence of his wife he takes a terrible plunge into Bohemian gaiety; the whole foundation of his standard faith trembles.

But like a *deus ex machina* the Good Citizens' League, a standard organization of standard citizens to promote and preserve the standard rules of American society, comes to his rescue, and with kind cruelty bullies and blarneys Babbitt back into the fold.

Main Street and *Babbitt*, it will be seen, are literary phenomena outside the ordinary limits of publications. A less sensational book that has recently sprung from the Middle West is a prose work by Mr. Edgar Lee Masters, the author of the *Spoon River Anthology*, entitled *Mitch Miller*. It is a story, told in the dialect of the country (' Grandpa said that he 'd been in the war and had seen two, and he 'd like to see war abolished with slavery and hard drink '), about two small boys, one of them called Mitch Miller, whom the average English boy would regard as a prig. He is the sort of boy who announces that ' Everybody lives that was ever wrote about,' and invites his chum to come to his father and hear the facts of sexual reproduction explained in terms of flowers. The two boys decide that Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn and their adventures were real, and that they, too, may have similar experiences ; indeed, they find treasures, have uncomfortable adventures with a madman, give testimony at his trial, and so on. Crude as the book is in many ways, it is not unreadable ; and, like

so many other American books of to-day, it has an interest outside its purely literary value. There are many people of taste in America who declare that, taking him for all in all, Mr. Masters is really at the very centre of present-day American literature. He registers, so to speak, its stages of development. For this reason particularly it is striking that he should have come to write such a story ; for, as Mr. Van Wyck Brooks has pointed out in his *Ordeal of Mark Twain*, there is much significance in the number of books of boyhood written by American authors ; it is, he declares, a sign of arrested growth. *Mitch Miller*, then, helps to establish the fact of the increasing bankruptcy of the older American tradition of literature.

So far, then, we are left in this position. *Mitch Miller* symbolizes the end of the old style in the Middle West ; *Main Street* pierces to the core of its rottenness ; while Mr. Dreiser's and Miss Cather's works show the vitality only of the non-English element there. One looks round for a writer in the English-American tradition

who can carry on the line of Middle Western literature into the world of the new American generation of writing, and inaugurate the ' new vigorous American literature, a literature absolutely native ' of which Mr. Hergesheimer speaks.

It may be Mr. Sherwood Anderson who will fulfil this great hope. Mr. Waldo Frank, in a diffuse but sometimes interesting book, *Our America*, gives a sketch of Mr. Anderson's career. He has been in turn a labourer, a soldier in the Spanish war, and a successful self-made business man. Then at the age of thirty-five he suddenly wrote a novel, ' as five hundred years ago his forebears might have gone to church and to confession.'

He wrote four novels before he ventured to show one to a literary critic, acting on whose advice he got it published—by an English firm, American publishers, as has so often happened with young American authors, being loth to present him to his countrymen. Since then he has gone steadily on, with *Windy Macpherson's Son* and *Marching Men* and then, a book which brought him recognition, *Winesburg, Ohio*. His last novel is

Poor White. It describes the life of the son of a shiftless ' poor white ' labourer ; he has a passion for invention and, after many half-hearted uncouth attempts to find himself, he is discovered by a slick young business man who utilizes his genius. His pathetic lack of self-confidence, his failure to orientate himself in the world where chance has set him, and his shyness both before the men he comes into contact with and the wilful girl who marries him are well described. At the last, however, one feels that he has come to earth. It is a book that is well worth reading, both for itself and as an example of the newer and better strain in Middle Western writing.

And yet *Poor White* did not wholly bear out the tentative promise of *Winesburg, Ohio*, that its author might fill the place which is open to-day for a great American writer. But since the publication of Mr. Sherwood Anderson's *The Triumph of the Egg* it has again been possible to hope that he will ' make good.' As if realizing that the long novel is not his forte, Mr. Anderson has returned to the method of his *Winesburg*,

Ohio. *The Triumph of the Egg* consists of eleven short pieces, two longer stories, and a short prologue and epilogue in *vers libre*. Mr. Anderson's *vers libre* is undistinguished ; he cannot use the instrument. A prose episode, ' Motherhood,' is far nearer poetry than either of his verse pieces. The life he pictures is too inchoate, too nervous ; the more fragmentary he is, the better ; the shorter episodes are the cream of the volume.

His is a study of adolescence—the egg come of hatching—the adolescence of a people, a small-town people with minds unformed, untaught, superficially efficient but mentally starving and greedy. His characters have the eagerness and the blindness of youth ; he shows their first searchings of their souls, and their bitter despair when they discover that truth and understanding are not to be found merely by the eager desire to find them. He signifies the beginnings of self-consciousness in American culture.

Several of his episodes might be summarized to show how this theme dominates his work, whether he is aware of it or not. Take, for example, the curious little sketch

called 'The Egg.' The father of the boy who tells the story worked as a farm-hand until he was thirty-four years old; then he married a country school teacher, and, with the birth of a son,

> something happened to the two people. They became ambitious. The American passion for getting up in the world took possession of them.

So they started a chicken farm, which turned out a failure. The eggs did not hatch, or the chickens died of a variety of maladies, or were stolen, or killed by misadventures. The family subordinated their lives to the eggs. After ten years' misery the parents move into a little town and open a restaurant, on a counter of which the father places a collection of glass bottles where are preserved in alcohol all the horrid little monstrosities that came to birth on the farm—chickens with four legs, two pairs of wings, two heads, or what not.

> Mother sometimes protested, but father was a rock on the subject of his treasure. The grotesques were, he declared, valuable. People, he said, liked to look at strange and wonderful things.

But the restaurant did not prosper, and in the long nights

> when there was little to do father had time to think. That was his undoing. He decided that he had in the past been an unsuccessful man because he had not been cheerful enough, and that in the future he would adopt a cheerful outlook on life.

He attempts to become a jolly innkeeper. But ' an egg ruined his new impulse in life.' A young merchant from the town enters the restaurant while waiting for a train ; the father, suffering from stage fright, shakes hands with him, and suddenly starts to talk of Christopher Columbus and the egg. He becomes so excited that Columbus should have made the egg stand upright by cheating and breaking its end that the young man thinks he is mad. Then the father tries to stand the egg on its end by rolling it between his hands ; after half an hour's efforts he does succeed in doing the trick for a moment, but the young man is no longer paying attention, and by the time he looks up the egg has rolled over again. Next he shows the young man a preserved chick with seven

legs and two heads, and when the visitor, a little upset at the sight, rises to go, he offers him a cigar and another cup of coffee to induce him to stay. Then he declares that he will show him a still better trick; he will heat an egg in vinegar and force it through the neck of a bottle. Just when at last after many efforts he is about to succeed in this trick, the train whistles and the young man gets up to go.

> Father made a last desperate effort to conquer the egg and make it do the thing that would establish his reputation as one who knew how to entertain guests who came into his restaurant. He worried the egg. He attempted to be somewhat rough with it. He swore and the sweat stood out on his forehead. The egg broke under his hand. When the contents spurted over his clothes, the young man, who had stopped at the door, turned and laughed.
>
> A roar of anger rose from my father's throat. He danced and shouted a string of inarticulate words. Grabbing another egg from the basket on the counter, he threw it, just missing the head of the young man as he dodged through the door and escaped.
>
> Father has come upstairs to mother and me, with an egg in his hand. I do not know what

> he intended to do. I imagine that he had some idea of destroying it, of destroying all eggs, and that he intended to let mother and me see him begin. When, however, he got into the presence of mother something happened to him.

He puts down the egg, drops on his knees and begins to cry like a child. It is all ' but another evidence of the complete and final triumph of the egg—at least as far as my family is concerned.' This little tale is as simple, as absurd, and as significant of America as a parable.

Another episode, ' Brothers,' describes a lonely old man whose obsession it is to claim relationship with people who are in the news. One morning he claims to be a cousin of a man who is standing for President ; another morning he tells that Caruso has married his sister-in-law. When an actress figures in the Divorce Courts in an unpleasant capacity, he says she is his sister, and, shaking his head sorrowfully—

> ' My sister, the actress, has got into trouble. Our house is not built very strongly,' he said as I went away along the path.

A murder takes place in Chicago to which

the newspapers devote a large amount of space ; a worker in a bicycle factory kills his wife in a fit of madness. The old man says that the murderer is his brother.

> The whole story of mankind's loneliness, of the effort to reach out to unattainable beauty, tried to get itself expressed from the lips of a mumbling old man, crazed with loneliness, who stood by the side of a country road on a foggy morning holding a little dog in his arms. The arms of the old man held the dog so closely that it began to whine with pain. A sort of convulsion shook his body. The soul seemed striving to wrench itself out of the body, to fly away through the fog, down across the plain to the city, to the singer, the politician, the millionaire, the murderer, to its brothers, cousins, sisters, down in the city. The intensity of the old man's desire was terrible, and in sympathy my body began to tremble. His arms tightened about the body of the little dog so that it cried with pain. I stepped forward and tore the arms away, and the dog fell to the ground and lay whining. No doubt it had been injured. Perhaps ribs had been crushed. The old man stared at the dog lying at his feet as in the hallway of the apartment building the worker from the bicycle factory had stared at his dead wife. ' We are brothers,' he said

> again. 'We have different names, but we are brothers. Our father, you understand, went off to sea.'

'Seeds' is the story of a young woman who comes to a Chicago boarding-house, mad with the desire for friendship. The men in the house sneer at her behind her back, and at last the landlady orders her to leave. An artist is living in the house, and on her last evening there the young woman enters his room and runs across to him, falling at his feet. The landlady enters, and the artist suddenly thinks to say that he and the woman are engaged to be married, and have been keeping the fact secret. Then they go out together, and she returns to her home in the West.

> She needed a lover, yes, the men in the house were quite right about that. She needed a lover, and at the same time a lover was not what she needed. The need of a lover was, after all, a quite secondary thing. She needed to be loved, to be long and quietly and patiently loved. To be sure she is a grotesque, but then all the people of the world are grotesques. We all need to be loved. What would cure her would cure the rest of

> us also. The disease she had is, you see, universal. We all want to be loved, and the world has no plan for creating our lovers.

Obviously, in his characters, it is not the puberty of the body, but of the mind, which concerns Mr. Anderson.

A character which occurs in several of his stories is that of the spinster of thirty-five to forty who awakes to the fact that life has passed her by ; her grotesqueness, like that of the woman in the last story, the old man in ' Brothers,' and the father in ' The Egg,' is the grotesqueness of the undeveloped mind coming for the first time out of its own mists into contact with the outside world. It is very much the stage of development that the real American spirit—as distinct from the alien English and Continental European impulses in the life of the country —has now reached. The difference between *Winesburg, Ohio* and *The Triumph of the Egg* shows the distance in self-interpretation that America has travelled in the last few years.

VII

It is clear that the fact that a new book deals with American life and is written by an American author does not necessarily entitle it to rank among the works of the American renaissance, even though it is a good and honest piece of work, written without the desire, conscious or unconscious, to win the praises of the Puritan elder generation. One may admire the books of Mrs. Edith Wharton—her best are *Ethan Frome*, *The Age of Innocence*, and *Glimpses of the Moon*—Mrs. Gertrude Atherton, and Mr. Booth Tarkington, and respect these writers for their intellectual integrity; but they undoubtedly belong mainly to what I may for convenience call the English tradition in American letters.

There are, on the other hand, a large number of young American writers who have started out along the path of literary

revolt, whose work should be watched. It is possible, probable even, that many of them will succumb to the bribes that every old ideal offers to young iconoclasts, in which case their early work will be excused as youthful effervescence and their later work, less creditable to them, though perhaps technically superior, acclaimed as a return to saner standards. I must add that only an *intelligentsia* will consider a bad book good because it is a rebellious book; and consequently I am not prepared to assume that every literary ugly duckling is a swan. Many of these wild ducklings may, after all, turn out to be merely geese. In this chapter, which must inevitably be largely one of personal judgments—and I put it forward only as such—I shall mention one or two of the younger American writers whose early work distinguishes them from the ruck of American writing but whose future it is as yet impossible to forecast.

There are, for example, several women writers who have taken as their theme the Middle Western woman condemned to dull, and often cruel, domesticity at the command

of the rigid Puritan creed that a woman's sole duty is to her family. Miss Zona Gale's *Miss Lulu Bett* is a study of a gentle creature crushed between the millstones of convention and the urge of her own personality. Equally admirable is *The Girls* by Miss Edna Ferber, a wistful tale of three generations of a Chicagoan family ; the only badly written page in this book is, unfortunately, the first, which, combined with the title, is likely to frighten away the inexperienced reader. Beside these, I would mention the name of Miss Ruth Suckow, whose stories I have read in the *Smart Set* magazine,[1] and for whom Mr. Mencken, one of its editors, predicts a future.

Mr. Floyd Dell, the author of *Moon Calf* and *The Briary Bush*, has deserved the gratitude of America for encouraging Mr. Sherwood Anderson to publish his work. *Moon Calf* is a readable story of a boy's life in a small Middle Western town ; *The Briary Bush*, its sequel, carries the story on into the whirl of Chicago journalism and art.

[1] In particular, ' The Best of the Lot ' (*Smart Set*, November 1922).

Zell was the first novel of Mr. 'Henry G. Aikman,' who in his later book, *For Richer, For Poorer*, has discarded this pseudonym for his real name of Armstrong. *Zell* is a praiseworthy story of a family brought up in the shadow of their parents' divorce; it has certainly little enough in common with the self-righteous world that makes its children sing the song he celebrates in its opening paragraphs :—

> You muss not play on Sunday, Sunday,
> Sunday,
> You muss not play on Sunday,
> God's holy day of rest.
>
> But you can play on Monday, Toosday,
> Wednesday,
> And Thursday, Friday, Saturday
> Till Sunday comes again.

Mr. Newton Fuessle was mentioned by Mr. Hugh Walpole, in an article referred to above, in the same breath as Mr. Sherwood Anderson, Mr. Joseph Hergesheimer, Miss Willa Cather, and one or two others of the new school of American letters. His new novel, *Gold Shod*, however, does not bear out the promise of his earlier book, *The*

Flail, but it is a commonplace story of a man 'with the soul of an artist' who becomes a successful business man. He deceives his wife, with the customary lack of success, but returns to her; fortunately the outbreak of the War makes him a millionaire, and he is able to compromise with his soul by becoming a patron of the arts.

Mr. Ben Hecht has been mentioned already in a footnote as an unfavourable critic of Mr. Cabell. His own books, *Erik Dorn* and *Gargoyles*, are agitated chronicles of consciously remarkable people, violent and disordered. I do not find his work any more important than the smoother *Three Soldiers* of Mr. John Dos Passos, a book which made a great stir in the autumn of 1921. Its theme is the experience of three young men in the American Expeditionary Force. All three, different as they are, are degraded and disappointed by army life, but the author shows us an army in which all the officers are incompetent nincompoops, and the men fools or bullies or both. The book was loudly commended in America as the first 'exposure' of American army life during

the War, a position which, however, it must surely yield to Mr. Upton Sinclair's *Jimmy Higgins*.

Mr. Sinclair is without honour in his own country, but, without being a great writer, he is at least a courageous and original one. Mr. Dos Passos is younger and may do better work later on, but Mr. Sinclair has already half a dozen sociological novels to his credit, besides such pamphlets as *The Brass Check* and *The Profits of Religion*, dealing respectively with the press and the churches in America. He is certainly the best of the school of novelists who are in the line of descent from Jack London—I would almost venture to include in this category Mr. Ernest Poole, author of *The Harbour* and other novels, and two excellent little books about Russia, *The Village* and *The Dark People*. If Mr. Sinclair cannot be claimed for the American renaissance, some credit must nevertheless be given him for having made it possible.

Mr. F. Scott Fitzgerald has won success at a phenomenally early age with his *This Side of Paradise*, a first novel above the average;

but he seems now to have fallen into the lure of the popular magazine story, a temptation ever presented to young American writers. Whether he will care to extricate himself remains to be seen; a later novel, *The Beautiful and Damned*, is witty and enjoyable, but of small literary value.

In *The Narrow House* Mrs. Evelyn Scott has described the drabness of American lower middle-class life with an intensity which has won the horrified praise of Mr. Sinclair Lewis. Her new book, *Bewilderment*, has received a colder reception from friendly critics.

Miss Dorothy Canfield's *The Brimming Cup* —an earlier novel was *The Bent Twig*—has been successful on both sides of the Atlantic, despite its almost unbelievable long-windedness. Parts of it are good, but I cannot help believing that readableness is one of the requisites of a good writer, especially at such a critical period as American literature is now passing through.

For this reason, if for no other, I look rather to the work of such young men as Mr. Claude Washburn to develop into

something worthy to stand beside that of the writers I have spoken of at greater length in previous chapters. His latest novel, *The Lonely Warrior*, is a story of America after the War. The hero, returning home after demobilization, finds that the flush of idealism with which his country entered the War has died down, and life has resumed its normal conditions, more so perhaps than in any other of the belligerent countries ; class and racial antagonism and greed are as powerful as before. His attitude is one of disillusionment—not the callow disillusionment of the cynical young idealist or that of the still more cynical Imperialist—but rather, as the title shows, a feeling of loneliness, of inability any longer to respond to the life of his fellow-countrymen.

The Lonely Warrior is not a masterpiece, but one feels in it, as in the work of Miss Zona Gale and Miss Ruth Suckow, and perhaps Mr. Floyd Dell, that there is the possibility of growth.

It is not strange that the extraordinary sweep forward of American literature in 1920

and 1921 and the two or three years before should be followed to-day by signs of a check; but there is every reason to think that this is only momentary. Now that the literary renaissance is an accomplished fact —as is the advance of national self-consciousness of which it is the reflection—one may anticipate the rise of new literary planets at any moment. I venture, therefore, to direct my readers' attention to the American books of to-day and to-morrow as one of the most important and significant phenomena of our time, and I confidently anticipate that our interest will not be disappointed.

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